

THINGS FALL APART

Matt Phillips, graduate researcher

As a rising literature scholar and doctoral student in English, Matt Phillips is used to examining how meaning comes together in literature.

These days, however, he's more interested in how things fall apart and, perhaps more importantly, how that decay affects us.

"I'm interested in entropy and empathy and the interplay there between," says the recipient of UNCG's Lisbeth V. Stevens Scholarship. "Those are the two things I'm always looking for in literature. How can this concept of thermodynamics inform us about a very human concept like empathy?"

Entropy, the notoriously complex principle at the center of Phillips' scholarship, can be described as chaos or the tendency of the universe to decline into disorder. Where physicists and chemists examine entropy in the context of thermodynamics, Phillips investigates it in fiction and nonfiction.

What happens when social structures, political systems, racial identity, or interpersonal relationships break down? Entropy can explain a cup of coffee cooling and ice melting in a glass, but can it offer insight into what happens to a person whose identity dissolves under the pressure of changing social norms or a British conqueror displaced from his place of power?

His hypothesis so far? Entropy results in an increased capacity for human compassion and empathy.

"It's essentially the degradation or breakdown of a closed system, whether that system is a universe or a person," Phillips says. "For example, in Toomer's 'Cane,' I looked at that degradation in terms of violence. By the end of 'Blood-Burning Moon,' a very violent short story in the book, we see an overt merging of characters who were once diametrically opposed. There's no happy ending at all, but you can see increased potential for interpersonal understanding."

Phillips, who also earned his master's degree at UNCG, presented his thesis

"Entropy and Equilibrium in Jean Toomer's 'Cane'" at the Society for the Study of Southern Literature Conference.

Entropy isn't the first scientific concept to arrest Phillips' attention and inspire his scholarship. He's presented on Mary Shelley's "Frankenstein" at the British Women Writers Association conference, and his essay on cryostasis and preservation of modernism in Don DeLillo's "Zero K" won the UNCG English department's Graduate Student Essay Award.

The breadth of works he explores is one reason his scholarship receives interest. Phillips' latest examination of empathy and the noble savage myth, which took UNCG's Atlantic World Research Network Graduate Student Research Prize, contrasts texts written four centuries apart. "I think if we're noticing repeating patterns throughout centuries of artistic production, that may hold some truth we could use."

A lifelong lover of sci-fi novels, Phillips was first inspired to explore entropy after reading Philip K. Dick's novel "Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?" He believes scientific principles can be used to great effect in literature to illuminate the human condition.

"What's more important than empathy, really?" Phillips asks. "If we can use a quantifiable scientific principle like entropy and filter it through literature, we might be able to further understand human connections and further understand each other."

By Victor Ayala

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