

7. LEARNING FROM THE GOOD ONES: DISSERTATION EXEMPLARS

Learning from examples is one of the most effective ways to understand what a strong dissertation looks like in practice. This section offers a selection of annotated excerpts taken from TFG dissertations awarded high marks at this university. They have been chosen to illustrate a range of skills: constructing an introduction, developing analytical writing, and drawing conclusions effectively.

The section also includes a list of links to further dissertations available in full on Zeguan, the University of Zaragoza's institutional repository, for those who wish to explore a wider range of examples.

➔ What a strong introduction looks like:

Read the following fragment carefully before turning to the commentary below.

The aim of this essay is to make a small contribution to the study of Holocaust narratives in the context of the “memory boom” and the development of Trauma Studies. I have chosen to analyze Rachel Seiffert's *The Dark Room* (2001)—a novel dealing with the perpetrators' side of the story—in an attempt to redress the balance between the great variety of victim-related works and the comparatively few that deal with the victimizers. Although the situation has started to change, traumatic episodes have usually been approached in connection to the people who suffered them, while less attention has been given to the experience of and the effects on the agency that caused them. Now that literature is getting to grips with these problematic issues, new trends are emerging through which the reader can open his/her eyes to fresh perspectives on past events. The Holocaust has proven crucial in this field, precisely because of its complex nature and the effects that it had (and still has) across different generations of both victims and perpetrators.

The essay begins with an introductory section that provides a framework for my analysis of the novel. It thus focuses on the main factors leading to the “memory boom” of the 1990s and its relation to the rise of Trauma Studies. The centrality of the Holocaust in this area is emphasized, as well as its problematic representation in the artistic field, especially when it comes to fictional narratives and the perpetrator figure. I highlight the way in which traumatic experiences disrupt language, but also the need to give them narrative form in order to cope with or work through trauma. This also applies to the descendants of those that lived through traumatic events, and so, I consider those theories that point to the possibility of trauma transmission across generational lines. In the last part of the introduction, I focus on a specific literary branch of perpetration narratives that brings the “ordinary German” to the fore in order to approach Seiffert's first novel as illustrative of this trend. *The Dark Room*—made up of three novella-length stories entitled after each protagonist's name—encompasses the experiences of three young Germans from different generations and

offers the reader a multi-sided picture of how direct and indirect involvement with Nazism can affect people through time.

Following the introduction, the analysis is divided into two different sections, one dealing with the novel's treatment of the past—in "Helmut" and "Lore"—and the other related to its recreation of the present—in "Micha". One of my main concerns has to do with showing the characters' evolution and their reactions to their troublesome circumstances, as well as the extent to which individual decisions and attitudes determine the degree of their traumas. Photography is a recurrent motif in the three stories. As many critics claim, photographs play a key role in this context because of their potential to revitalize, sustain or even create memories that link the present and the past. It is important, then, to consider the use that the novel makes of photography, which is also related to the writer's choice of aesthetic and stylistic devices, as will be explained in the conclusions at the end of the essay.

(María Batlle Gavín, *Memory, Trauma and the Perpetrator Figure: Transgenerational Responses to the Holocaust in Rachel Seiffert's The Dark Room*. 2014)

What makes this introduction exemplary:

1. **The thesis statement:** The very first sentence—"The aim of this essay is to make a small contribution to the study of Holocaust narratives"—does several things at once: it identifies the field (Holocaust narratives / Trauma Studies); it names the dissertation's contribution clearly, and it signals that the student understands where their work fits in a larger scholarly context. The choice of primary text is not arbitrary: it is "an attempt to redress the balance." The student is entering a critical debate and taking a position within it.
2. **Contextualisation within a field before discussion of the primary text:** Holocaust narratives, the memory boom, Trauma Studies. This dissertation is not just about one novel, it is about what that novel can tell us about something larger.
3. **Identification of a critical gap:** The introduction makes explicit what has "not" been done in the field, the relative neglect of perpetrator narratives, and positions the dissertation as a response to that gap.
4. **A clear and detailed roadmap:** The second and third paragraphs provide signposting of the dissertation's structure: the theoretical framework, the two analytical sections, the recurrent motif of photography, and the conclusions.
5. **Integration of the structural and the thematic:** Rather than describing the dissertation's sections mechanically, the roadmap weaves in the dissertation's key analytical concern: photography. The student signals that her analysis will connect form and content ("aesthetic and stylistic devices").
6. **Clear, precise academic prose:** The writing is formal but not unnecessarily complex. Every sentence says something. The student sounds like she knows what she is talking about.

→ What strong analysis looks like:

The body of your dissertation is where your argument is built, paragraph by paragraph, through the close analysis of your primary text(s). It is also where the most common weakness in undergraduate writing tends to appear: the tendency to summarise rather than analyse. Summarising tells the reader what happens in a text—what a character does, what a passage describes, what an author says. Analysing tells the reader how the text works and what it means: why a particular word choice matters, what effect a narrative technique produces, how a specific image connects to the dissertation's central argument. The examples that follow illustrate what this distinction looks like in practice.

1. Close reading

This excerpt shows a student analysing specific language: word choice, imagery, narrative voice, syntax. It demonstrates the move from textual detail to meaning:

In Gemma's tale, there is a 'bad fairy', but she wears black boots and 'silver eagles' on her hat, which makes her a representation of the Nazis. She comes and curses the 'princess' and all her relatives and community. Gemma is herself the princess and the curse stands for the implementation of the extermination plan but also, I would say, for the traumatic pathology that Gemma suffers from, for the legacy of the Holocaust that has affected survivors and their descendants. The 'mist' and the 'sleep' brought about by the bad fairy refer to the death by gassing of so many camp inmates. The princess was 'not able to wake up for a hundred years', which evokes the long-lasting effects of trauma. There is the already-mentioned sense of timelessness when Gemma glosses that a hundred years is "*forever*" (Yolen 34, 44, emphasis in the original): she will never be able to fully recover from her past and others did actually sleep forever in the sense that they lost their lives before the Germans were defeated.

(Alexandra Popa, *Victims, Perpetrators, and Third-Generation Quests: The Traumatic Legacy of the Holocaust in Jane Yolen's Briar Rose and Rachel Seiffert's 'Micha'*. 2015)

2. Integrating secondary sources

This passage shows a student using a critic not to replace their own argument but to anchor or challenge it. The student resorts to several critics but always draws her own conclusions after each citation:

According to Headley, there is no evidence in the original poem to support such reading, as Grendel's mother is never physically described and the language that the author used when telling about her is not necessarily connected with monstrosity. Most of the times, she is just described with the feminine forms of the adjectives used

for Beowulf and other warriors, such as *aglaec-wif* or *aglaeca*, which are translated as 'hero' or 'formidable fighter' when referring to the main character (Headley, *Beowulf* xxv). In sum, translators made decisions when faced with certain terms and expressions that were rendered into English by choosing words with negative connotations. They made Grendel's mother truly monstrous, while other translations were possible. They were nonetheless discarded, even if the same terms were used for male characters on the side of goodness in the poem and therefore translated in a more positive or neutral way.

Some critics have argued that, leaving her origins aside, her behaviour is not that of a murderous monster either. In fact, it is very similar to that of the 'properly' human characters, and quite in tune with the customs of Anglo-Saxon society and culture. Unlike her son, Grendel's mother had never caused trouble or killed anyone before Grendel's death. As Bari puts it, she only attacks after Grendel is killed, avenging him as it would have been legitimate and even expected according to Anglo-Saxon blood-feud laws (37). Beowulf himself explains that 'it is always better to avenge dear ones than to indulge in mourning' (Heaney 97), and he behaves in the same way by tracing Grendel's mother to her lair and attacking her after she murders Æschere in revenge for her son's death.

(Silvia Lafuente Sangüesa, *Stirring the Cauldron of Story: J.R.R. Tolkien's and Maria Dahvana Headley's Versions of Beowulf*. 2023)

3. Developing an argument across a paragraph

This fragment shows a well-constructed body paragraph: topic sentence, textual evidence and analysis. The paragraph builds its argument in stages rather than simply listing observations.

The ruby choker necklace, a wedding present from the Marquis, is a symbol of his ownership and domination of women in this especially macabre version of 'Bluebeard'. From the first time that the narrator describes it, it conveys a sense of suffocation and death rather than glamour: 'His wedding gift, clasped round my throat. A choker of rubies, two inches wide, like an extraordinarily precious slit throat' (Carter 11). The choker is a metonymy for the Marquis' hands, which reinforce his possession of the heroine, as well as his capacity to suffocate her. It is the death of the first wife, the Opera singer, that directly evokes suffocation in the tale, as she was strangled by the Marquis: 'On her throat I could see the blue imprint of his strangler's fingers' (Carter 38). This quotation reinforces the symbolism of the choker as a metonymy of the Marquis' hands, who is confirmed to have strangled a woman with his bare hands. The choker also foreshadows the planned decapitation of the female character at the end of the story. This glamorous accessory was inherited by the Marquis' grandmother, a woman who lived during the French Revolution and escaped from the guillotine: 'He made me put on my choker, the family heirloom of one woman who had escaped the blade' (Carter 21). This conveys a sense of hope, a hint at all the women who manage to escape an oppressing system, such as the heroine herself.

(Amanda Cámara Gamazo, *Claustrophobia and Imprisonment in Angela Carter's The Bloody Chamber: Surviving Male Domination*. 2024)

➔ **What a strong conclusion looks like:**

Read the following fragment carefully before turning to the commentary below.

To conclude, Angela Carter's rewritings have become a literary gem that denounce the miseries suffered by women throughout history. This dissertation has analysed the first three tales of her prestigious collection, focusing on the role of claustrophobia and imprisonment in the female experience against patriarchy. The contact of the heroines with their captor and the effects of the male dominated spaces convey the suffocation provoked by a patriarchal system in which female individuals are granted no voice. Additionally, there is an introspection on the heroines, who illustrate distinct reactions to the claustrophobic effects of male domination. "The Bloody Chamber" hints at the deathly consequences of violent domination. Yet, its way to resolve the imprisonment implies the cooperation of women so as to fight the oppressive male force embodied by the Marquis. Then, the reworkings of "Beauty and the Beast" explore two different endings regarding the heroine's emancipation. "The Courtship of Mr. Lyon" preserves the submissive female character that humanises the isolated Beast. Eventually, he frees her and it is her choice to return and evolve together. "The Tiger's Bride" establishes a contrast to the thematic development in the first version of the classic tale. The heroine illustrates the female frustration and anxiety provoked by the inability to be the owner of her own life. However, the story ends with a magical and hopeful event in which she rejects the oppressing patriarchy of human society and accepts the company of the Tiger. Thus, she is reborn as a new version of herself, now animal rather than human. These stories illustrate the changing atmosphere of the late 20th century, in which women's literary production and role in literature was critically revised. Angela Carter reversed Charles Perrault's "Bluebeard" and the classic tale of "Beauty and the Beast" in order to denounce the stereotypically submissive role of women and their lack of freedom, characteristics that were idealised rather than questioned in fairy tales. *The Bloody Chamber* exemplifies the new modes of depicting women as complex beings rather than individuals trapped by simplistic binaries. As explained by Gamble: "These are texts in which the heroines, now fully-rounded distinctive characters, write their own autobiographies" (9). Thus, Carter's heroines encourage the reader to share their own perspectives and reasoning, while they learn about themselves in their confinement, providing hope for a future of women liberated from the cages of patriarchy.

(Amanda Cámara Gamazo, *Claustrophobia and Imprisonment in Angela Carter's The Bloody Chamber: Surviving Male Domination*. 2024)

What makes this conclusion exemplary:

1. **It returns to the opening argument without simply repeating it.** The conclusion opens by restating the dissertation's central claim but immediately moves forward

by specifying what the analysis has demonstrated. The student does not recycle the Introduction, she shows what has been achieved by the preceding chapters.

2. **It provides a synthesis, not a summary.** Rather than listing what each chapter contained, the student draws out the relationship between the three tales: a progression from violent domination to two contrasting resolutions of female emancipation. This is an analytical synthesis—the ability to see the parts as a coherent whole—and it is one of the clearest markers of a strong conclusion.
3. **It connects the primary text to a broader historical and literary context.** The reference to “the changing atmosphere of the late 20th century” and the critical revision of women’s literary production situates the analysis within the larger argument about why Carter’s work matters. The dissertation is shown to be about more than one collection of stories.
4. **It integrates a secondary source to reinforce, not replace, the student’s own argument.** The quotation from Gamble (“These are texts in which the heroines, now fully-rounded distinctive characters, write their own autobiographies”) is used with a purpose: it validates the student’s reading and adds critical authority at the moment of closing. Secondary sources in conclusions should always perform this validating function rather than introduce new lines of argument.
5. **It ends with a clear, resonant statement of the dissertation’s significance.** The final sentence—Carter’s heroines “providing hope for a future of women liberated from the cages of patriarchy”—closes the argument on a note that is interpretive and forward-looking. The image of the “cage” echoes the central motif of imprisonment that has run throughout the dissertation, giving the conclusion a sense of structural and thematic closure.

If you wish to explore further, the following dissertations have been selected for their outstanding quality:

- Batlle Gavín, María <https://zaguan.unizar.es/record/16315>
Memory, Trauma and the Perpetrator Figure: Transgenerational Responses to the Holocaust in Rachel Seiffert’s The Dark Room
- Benedi Lamarca, Vanessa <https://zaguan.unizar.es/record/85155>
Faith versus Reason as Reflected in Salman Rushdie’s Two Years, Eight Months and Twenty-Eight Nights
- Brown Tirapu, Henry Joseph <https://zaguan.unizar.es/record/75102>
Elizabeth Gaskell’s North and South: Mediation between “Master and Men” through the Intersecting Axes of Class and Gender
- Cámara Gamazo, Amanda <https://zaguan.unizar.es/record/147362>

Claustrophobia and Imprisonment in Angela Carter's The Bloody Chamber: Surviving Male Domination

- Carmona Moliner, María <https://zaguan.unizar.es/record/147597>

Vulnerability and Precariousness in Sally Rooney's Normal People

- Cosculluela Viso, Leticia <https://zaguan.unizar.es/record/107684>

"I have sung of the women in the shadows": Rewriting Patriarchal Constructs of Femininity in Carol Ann Duffy's The World's Wife

- Embid Wypysczyk, Patricia <https://zaguan.unizar.es/record/15518>

The Heroine Who Felt Too Much: The Transition from Neoclassicism to Romanticism as Reflected in the Figure of Marianne Dashwood

- Hernaiz Martínez, Yolanda <https://zaguan.unizar.es/record/107683>

"White Niggers" and Middle-Class Slaves: The Race Metaphor at the Service of Anglocentrism in Wide Sargasso Sea and Jane Eyre

- Lafuente Sangüesa, Silvia <https://zaguan.unizar.es/record/147515>

Stirring the Cauldron of Story: J.R.R. Tolkien's and Maria Dahvana Headley's Versions of Beowulf

- Pablo Tomás, María José <https://zaguan.unizar.es/record/85531>

Looking for Heaven: The Abandoned Children of Wuthering Heights in their Path from Isolation to Maturity

- Popa, Alexandra <https://zaguan.unizar.es/record/31952>

Victims, Perpetrators, and Third-Generation Quests: The Traumatic Legacy of the Holocaust in Jane Yolen's Briar Rose and Rachel Seiffert's "Micha"

- Villanova Pérez, Andrea <https://zaguan.unizar.es/record/167056>

Intermediality and Female Agency in Wuthering Heights: A Comparative Study of Brontë's Novel and Emma Rice's Theatrical Adaptation

- Zarranz Allueva, Marina Irene <https://zaguan.unizar.es/record/107638>

The Value of Literacy: Breaking the Cycle of Oppression through Writing in The Colour of Milk

How do you cite a dissertation in a reference entry?

To cite a dissertation in MLA style, include in the entry the author, title, and date as core elements. As an optional element, list the institution granting the degree and a description of the work (type of degree conferred).

Njus, Jesse. *Performing the Passion: A Study on the Nature of Medieval Drama and Acting*. 2020. Northwestern University, PhD dissertation.

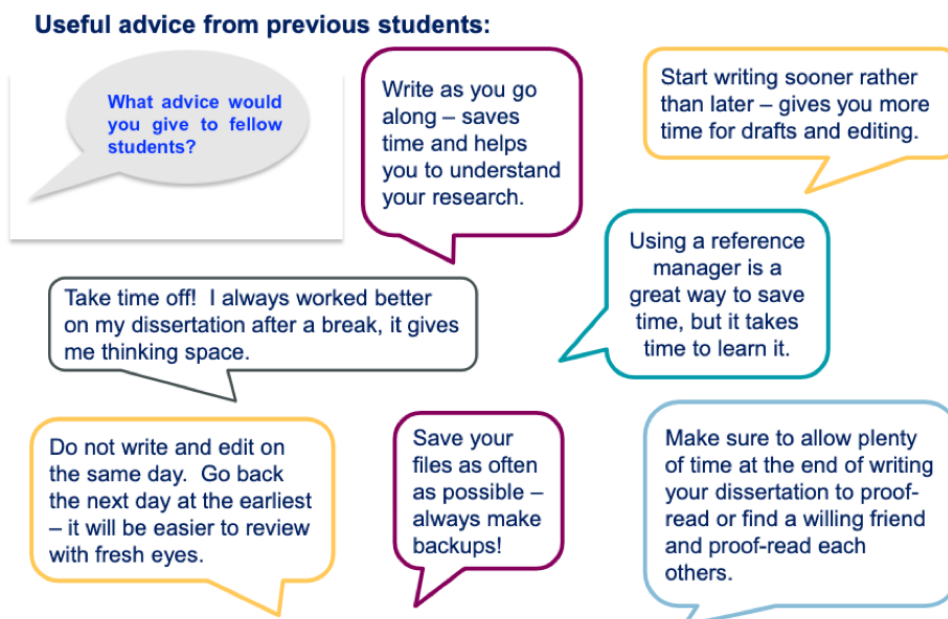
Ara Gregorio, Aimar. *A Reading of Ted Hughes: Nature Poetry and the Ecological Sublime*. 2019. University of Zaragoza, Undergraduate dissertation.

If you accessed the dissertation through an online repository, include that information.

Brooks, Alison. *The Architecture of the Alibi: Spatial Constraint and Narrative Deception in the Country House Mysteries of Agatha Christie*. 2024. University of Toronto, Master's thesis. TSpace Repository, tspace.library.utoronto.ca/handle/1807/7019.

Hernaiz Martínez, Yolanda. *"White Niggers" and Middle-Class Slaves: The Race Metaphor at the Service of Anglocentrism in Wide Sargasso Sea and Jane Eyre*. 2021. Z Guan, zguan.unizar.es/record/107683.

Academic excellence is not achieved in a vacuum. As we have tried to show, fellow students—both past and present—can also be good guides. Explore the specific TFG we have proposed as exemplars, and read the advice of some who have already walked this path,¹ because you can always learn from your peers.



¹ Advice taken from the document "Dissertation Planner: Step-by-Step," elaborated by the Institute for Academic Development of the University of Edinburgh. https://www.docs.hss.ed.ac.uk/iad/Student_resources/Dissertations/Diss-proj_planner_digital_Jan2024.pdf