

## Manipulation of the Reader's Empathy in Iris Murdoch's First-Person Narrative\*

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### ABSTRACT

As a very prolific Irish author and philosopher, Iris Murdoch (1919-1999) published her fifteenth novel, *The Black Prince*, which was first announced in 1973, to pay homage not only to Plato, but also to Shakespeare and Freud. What is peculiar to this novel is the fact that it is especially discussed throughout the text that the Freudian sexual imagery of Murdoch's protagonist is a clear reference to both Shakespeare and his fictional creation, Hamlet. It is obvious that in a fictional work character identification requires empathy, and "There is no question ... that readers feel empathy with (and sympathy for) fictional characters and other aspects of fictional worlds" (Keen, 2007; vii). However, besides the above qualities of the novel, *The Black Prince* pictures a protagonist who is very likely to manipulate the reader's empathy with him. As Murdoch unconventionally structured her novel to have forewords and postscripts by all of her main characters, her protagonist, who is supposed to be the only speaker and thus the only source of information for the reader (*The Black Prince* is an example of first-person narration where the narrator is one of the characters in the story, usually the protagonist of the text), loses his privilege and becomes just one of the speakers among other characters who have their own narratives – the forewords and the postscripts since the fictional editor of the novel publishes texts written by all of the main characters of the novel, including the protagonist. Because of this, the protagonist throughout the novel frequently announces that he tells the reader nothing but the truth. He does not want to lose the reader's interest on him as the protagonist of the novel that the reader is reading. However, the main points of his narration seem to contradict especially with the points that Murdoch's other main characters establish in their own narratives. Hence, *The Black Prince* depicts a protagonist whose account of the events fails to be reliable for the reader. It becomes quite possible in the novel that the protagonist tells the reader not the truth, but his own version of the truth.

**Keywords:** Empathy, Manipulation, Truth, Fiction, Protagonist, Narrator, Narration, Reader.

## Iris Murdoch'ın Birinci Kişi Anlatısında Okuyucunun Empati Duygusunun Suistimal Edilmesi

### ÖZ

Oldukça üretken bir İrlandalı yazar ve filozof olan Iris Murdoch (1919-1999), kendisinin onbeşinci romanı olan ve ilk kez 1973 yılında duyurulan *The Black Prince*'i, sadece Platon'a karşı değil aynı zamanda Shakespeare ve Freud'a karşı da saygısını ifade etmek için yayımlamıştır. Bu romanın bir özelliği ise, Murdoch'ın ana karakterinin Freud'cu cinsellik betimlemesinin Shakespeare ve onun kurgusal karakteri olan Hamlet'e bir gönderme olduğunun roman boyunca tartışılmasıdır. Kurgusal bir yapıtta karakterle kurulan özdeşleştirme açıktır ve "okuyucuların karakterler ve kurgusal eserlerin diğer özelliklerine duydukları empati ve sempati sorgulanamaz" (Keen, 2007; vii). Fakat bu romanın yukarıdaki özellikleri yanında, *The Black Prince* okuyucunun kendisine duyduğu empatiyi suistimal etmeye çok yatkın bir ana karakteri betimler. Murdoch romanını belli başlı karakterlerinin tamamı tarafından yazılan önsöz ve sonsözler etrafında kurguladığından, tek anlatıcı ve bu nedenle de tek bilgi kaynağı olması beklenen ana karakter (*The Black Prince* anlatıcının karakterlerden birisi, genellikle de ana karakter, olduğu birinci kişi anlatımı örneğidir.) bu ayrıcalığını kaybedip – romanın kurgusal editörü ana karakterin de aralarında bulunduğu diğer karakterler tarafından anlatılan önsöz ve sonsözleri yayımladığından – kendi öykülerini anlatan diğer karakterler arasında yerini alır. Bu nedenle, roman boyunca ana karakter sadece doğruyu anlattığını yineler. Okuyucunun kendisine olan ilgisinin kaybolmasını istemez. Fakat, anlatımının ana konuları, diğer anlatıcıların ortaya koyduğu olgularla çelişir. Bu nedenle *The Black Prince* olayları anlatımı okuyucu için güvenilir olmayan bir ana karakteri betimler. Romanda okuyucuya doğru yerine doğrunun kendi yorumlamasını anlatan bir ana karakterin varlığı gözle görülür hale gelir.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** Empati, Yönlendirme, Doğru, Kurgu, Ana Karakter, Anlatıcı, Anlatım, Okuyucu.

\* This study is an extended version of the paper presented at 3rd Global Meeting: Empathy Conference in Oxford, UK in 2016.

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Makalenin Gönderim Tarihi: 15.03.2017; Makalenin Kabul Tarihi: 26.07.2017

### I. Empathy and Narrative Fiction

Although empathy is a special quality that has specifically been considered providing the necessary opportunities for a personal connection between the reader and the protagonist in any form of narrative fiction, it is at the same time a very special element that is occasionally not only used but also abused by fictional entities – characters and sometimes even narrators – in a number of literary works. Related to this, for example, some research that has been carried out on the special meaning of empathy has distinctively concentrated on “different varieties of empathy, focusing particularly on the difference between compassion and pity” (Hogan, 2011; 8). In addition to this specific point, the place of empathy in art, particularly empathy in narrative fiction that the reader develops for the fictional characters, has uniquely been underlined through some other analyses. As it is argued here in this example,

Empathy felt with fictional characters, as an art of emotion, does not require making *judgments* about what a possible or actual person believes (desires, etc.), or about what people like that character would feel given those beliefs (desires, etc.), or about how people in general would feel or what they would believe or desire. In one of the now-classic theories of empathy, Vernon Lee proposed that empathy was the process of transferring properties of one's activity to an object. The German word for empathy, *Einfühlung*, translates literally as ‘feeling oneself into something.’ Such an account contrasts strikingly with the account of empathy with real-life emotions ... which does not involve a projection of my activity onto another person or object, but rather involves the formation of second-order beliefs about that person's beliefs, which are either the individuating devices for, or objects of, his or her emotions. (Feagin, 1997; 57)

Besides the examples of the cases of empathetic interactions from literature, fictional narratives in particular, there are theoretical discussions of empathy in other disciplines as well such as psychology, linguistics and communication studies. Every written or oral narrative generates empathy since narratives establish a form of correspondence between the speaker and the listener (Erdem Mete, 2015). And this study now especially aims to demonstrate one of the most remarkable examples of the particular situation above in English-language fiction. But before any attempts at an analysis and an interpretation of such an example, some decisive theoretical narrative guidelines on the notion of empathy and its instant connotations in literature should first be outlined.

In her book, *Empathy and the Novel*, which is one of the most referred works in terms of the studies about empathy in literature, Suzanne Keen has carried out one of the most detailed studies ever accomplished about the place and the significance of empathy in narrative fiction. In her study, Keen particularly provides her reader with a very practical working definition of empathy. According to her interpretation, empathy is a “a vicarious, spontaneous sharing of affect, [that] can be provoked by witnessing another's emotional state, by hearing about another's condition, or even by reading. It need not be a conscious response ...” (2007; 4).

This definition of empathy as it seems very obviously relates to a specific situation. In other words, what has implied here in Keen's explanation of the essence of empathy is the reader's perception of the textual situations in which the fictional character, specifically the protagonist here in this example, exists and operates. Keen in the above quotation defines empathy particularly in its relation to the collection of feelings that the reader develops towards the protagonist during the act of reading.

Therefore, it might now further be asserted that the real significance of empathy in literature lies in the reader's approach to an understanding of the specific characterisation and characteristics of the protagonist. Highly relevant to this particular statement, it is absolutely unpredictable for Keen to notice such a specific instance that “The example of D. H. Lawrence, so positive for my informant, brings us

once again to the topic of the possible negative consequences of novel reading. A. S. Byatt blames Lawrence for misleading an entire generation of women readers into false expectations about sex and poor choices of sex partners” (2007; 66).

In addition to these, Keen further proposes a number of hypotheses for her readers that could be eminently useful for a better understanding of the interpretation of empathy in narrative fiction. Besides this, all representational arts have provided opportunities for the study of the place and function of empathy. According to an interpretation, the speaker is

concerned with the reciprocity involved in the empathetic recognition of another’s expression and the fact that through representations this reciprocity is all but hindered. Our humanity shows in our interest in empathy and our capacity of empathizing with others, and this is extended to represented others, whether these representations are documentary or fictional. I want to look into an aspect of fictions rarely addressed: the relation as it shows forth in the representation between the subject matter and the person who produces the representation, irrespective of whether he writes, paints, or uses a technological apparatus such as a camera, at the moment of the inception of the representation. I think that in this relation we may find an answer to the question why fictions are important, and how they share the subjective. (van Gerwen, 2015; 339)

And among the most significant of these hypotheses is the suggestion that instead of a fully detailed and realistic presentation, empathy in narrative fiction surprisingly functions through minimal elements of identification between the reader and the protagonist. It is quite obvious that character identification that specifically results from empathy does not require any complexity of characterisation. According to Keen, the reader does not necessarily require to discover a complex characterisation to be present in the text. On the contrary, a simple outline of characterisation can provide for the reader the necessary elements of identification with the protagonist (Keen, 2007; xii, 69, 76, 169). Corresponding to this claim, the idea that empathy is not necessarily the result of a close relationship among individuals – either factual or fictional – is proposed through a reference to empathy in fictional narratives:

One implication (and limitation) of the phenomenological proposal is that by highlighting and emphasizing the intuitive character of empathy, it also restricts it to face-to-face-based forms of interpersonal encounter. Importantly, this doesn’t mean that empathy is necessarily restricted to dyadic relationships. It might very well be possible to empathize with a group, say, a mourning family. However, on many other accounts, and this is also reflected in colloquial speech, it makes perfect sense to say that we can also empathize with individuals or groups of people not present, and even with fictional literary figures. (Zahavi, 2014; 151-152)

## II. Empathy for A Specific Case

In the case of Iris Murdoch’s *The Black Prince*, in terms of the use of empathy, it first needs to be stated that there are two strong possibilities of character traits concerning the protagonist of Murdoch’s novel. This is to say that Murdoch’s protagonist either pretends to be a man who has been suffering or who dramatically exaggerates hardships that he has personally encountered in his life as a single writer and a literary critic as depicted in the novel. And the reason for this specific situation is surprisingly the simple fact that the protagonist desperately needs the reader’s empathy with him. This specific situation of the protagonist in terms of the possible manipulation of feelings and emotions by the same character obviously accords with the following perception that

this is a matter of the particular emotion system being activated. Fear, for example, tends to be contagious. Sorrow, in contrast, tends to provoke empathy. When we hear a shriek of terror, our first impulse is to feel egoistic fear. We are inclined to isolate a danger and to place it in relation to our current position. In contrast, when we hear someone sobbing, our impulse is to feel 'sorrow for' that person, to orient toward the person, to approach him or her. (Hogan, 2011; 64)

It is now to be underlined that this specific situation is because of the fact that Murdoch as the novelist has intentionally and systematically undermined the supposedly unique position of her protagonist as the only narrator of her novel. She does this through unconventionally providing the reader with five other narrators who are given, at the end of the novel, opportunities in terms of their postscripts to provide the reader with their own narratives.

Therefore, this means that the protagonist has not been left alone by Murdoch to enjoy the luxury of being the only narrator in the text since in first-person narration the protagonist is supposed to be the only authoritative narrator. As a result of this situation, the protagonist, throughout his personal story in the novel – the protagonist's autobiographical story is the main part of Murdoch's novel – tries to use and abuse the reader's empathy with him whenever he thinks that it is necessary for him to survive just as one of the narrators. Here a specific interpretation of the implication of empathy in literature helps clarify the position of Murdoch's protagonist over an absorbing comparison between empathy and suspense:

empathy is at the basis of our emotional responses to literature. Some writers maintain that it is not just empathy; there is also suspense and other emotions. It is true that there are some emotions that arise in literary experience that is nonempathic. For example, our surprise at a new development in a literary work is our own surprise; it is not an empathic surprise for a character. However, with only rare exceptions, these are not the emotions that sustain our reading of a literary work. If we do not have some empathic response to the characters and their concerns, it is very unlikely that we will be at all engaged by a story. Here, we might consider suspense. Suppose that, watching a movie, I feel suspense about whether or not the heroine will escape the serial killer. My suspense there is based almost entirely on my empathic connection with the heroine. It is not (again, with rare exceptions) a disinterested contemplation – nor is it an egocentric emotion, because I am not being pursued by the serial killer, nor is any of my friends or relatives. (Hogan, 2011; 36)

The specific connection between empathy and suspense as it has been demonstrated above has also been addressed elsewhere claiming that "To a large extent, a theory of suspense must include within it a theory of empathy" and at the same time asking the question "Under what circumstances do we care sufficiently about other people to engage in active thought about their fates" (Gerrig, 1993; 80)?

It should not be forgotten that Murdoch was not only a very prolific novelist who published a number of fictional works but also a very devoted Platonistic philosopher who taught classical philosophy at St. Anne's College, Oxford. Because of her Platonic philosophical background, Murdoch consciously made visible her suspicion of the conventional elements of realistic art forms not only in her fictional works but also in her philosophical writings – This is obviously a result of Murdoch's artistic reworking of Plato's distrust of the artist and imitative art. According to Murdoch, therefore, the components of a particular literary genre – in this particular case, it is the novel – such as the character, but specifically the protagonist, are nothing more than imperfect copies of Platonistic divine forms.

Therefore, the first question to be asked is how Murdoch as a novelist could then trust the conventional ingredients of traditional realistic fiction. In other words, it is quite possible that Murdoch,

this time particularly as a Platonist, who believed the inferiority of worldly structures to ideal divine forms somehow had to undermine the position of what was traditional in her work, including of course that of her protagonist. And she especially did this through her portrayal of a narrator-protagonist the reliability of whose version of the fictional events is severely challenged by some other narrators in the same text. Murdoch's protagonist dramatically loses the privilege of being the authoritative voice that he is supposed to be among other characters in the novel. Instead, her protagonist remains as just one of the marginal narrative voices like other characters in his story.

Murdoch, first being a Platonistic philosopher and then referring to the nature of realistic art, herself stated in one of her philosophical works that "art is always bad for us in so far as it is mimetic or imitative" (1999; 390-396). This statement that seems quite surprising for a novelist is a declaration of a general view of Murdoch's philosophy of artistic creation that she defined according to Platonic ideas and norms. Murdoch as a novelist-philosopher formulated this belief on Plato's ideas about the deceptive nature of all realistic representation in the temporal world. In addition to this, as it has similarly been observed elsewhere, it can be maintained that "mimesis is not involved in Murdoch's definition of realism; she is too much of a Platonist to trust mere imitation. Murdochean realism involves seeing not only what is in the text but what lies beyond it" (Tucker, 1992; 9-16). This particular situation must have encouraged Murdoch to reject the conventional notions of character description that eventually motivated her protagonist to abuse the empathetic nature of her readers.

### III. Empathy and Experimental Narrative

It must specially be noticed here that Murdoch's novel, *The Black Prince*, is among what it is called as Murdoch's most experimental literary works not only in terms of the novel's explicit questioning of the meaning and validity of the ingredients of narrative fiction but also in terms of the novel's play with certain long-established norms of realistic literature. Besides this, there is another peculiarity – of course connected to the protagonist's manipulation of the reader's empathy with him – that should be mentioned here: during the time when Murdoch published *The Black Prince*, the adjective 'experimental' in terms of works of literature was regarded as almost synonymous with postmodernism. Related to this, the term postmodern has been attributed to *The Black Prince* mostly because of the novel's unconventional features, particularly the existence of multiple narrators instead of a single central narrator.

However, Murdoch's novel has been designated as an experimental work also because of the novel's special emphasis on truth as one of its most frequently employed themes. And it should not be forgotten that the protagonist of the novel always claims that he has the truth. As it is known, the meaning of truth has crucially been challenged since it has been argued that truth is one of the most significant, what it is called, 'metanarratives' ironically created by human beings themselves. Related to this idea, the protagonist's insistence on telling the truth or his underlining the idea that he has got the truth in order to fully manipulate the reader's empathy with him all corresponds to this detail. From another perspective but absolutely relevant to this point is the assertion that "the creation of empathy for characters is one key strategy of attracting wider audiences to novels" (McCracken, 2011; 175). This is at the same time the protagonist's claim that he has been representing the authority; he has been the centre of the story. The protagonist frequently implies that he has the truth, and therefore the reader who has already developed empathy with him should as a result rely on his manipulative accounts.

In this particular example of character manipulation of the empathy of the reader in Murdoch's novel, the protagonist's insistence on having the truth is unquestionably the result of his attempt at manipulating the reader's empathy with him as a man who has represented himself as somebody whom the reader can certainly have confidence. As it has appropriately been stated elsewhere, this situation is

also because of the fact that “We have empathy for the fictional characters – we know how they are feeling – because we literally experience the same feelings ourselves” (Iacoboni, 2009; 4). What is more interesting here is the case that the protagonist himself composes an autobiographical story since he especially believes that art is – since he is a novelist – the most suitable medium to tell the truth to the reader. The protagonist, therefore, tries to establish and convey the idea to the reader that “Art is concerned not just primarily but absolutely with truth. It is another name for truth. The artist is learning a special language in which to reveal truth” (Murdoch, 2003; 56). This is also due to his manipulative intentions.

Contrary to the protagonist's overwhelming insistence on the presence of the truth that is ready to be delivered to the reader through his autobiographical story, the whole issue is observed elsewhere as problematic enough to be suspicious of the notion of truth itself. The term truth, which is already abused by the protagonist, is now so problematic that the protagonist cannot claim that he has the truth in the novel. The only logical conclusion is that it is to manipulate the reader's empathy with him. Therefore the situation becomes more and more complicated as long as the protagonist “insists that truth is simple. However ... it is far from simple to determine. The concept of one truth ... is now regarded with suspicion. It is more sensible to talk of truths plural” (Nicol, 2004; 97). As a result of this conclusion, it might be suggested that the protagonist is not simply able to pronounce any part of his actual experiment both as a novelist and as a speaker. Analogous to the discussion above, another similar argument especially underlines the paradoxical claim of having the fictional truth not only in the narrative of Murdoch's protagonist but also in other examples of contemporary literature. According to this view, it can only be a parody to claim the truth in fiction thus referring to the protagonist's manipulation: “*The Black Prince* ... is best read as a fable about the difficulties of ... truth-telling. It raises the question of truth and lies, and offers an endless series of receding, unattainable, focused images of truth, but nothing believable, nothing habitable” (Byatt, 1980; 34-36). If “truth-telling” – although theoretically – no longer attainable in the present era, it is almost acceptable that any kind of speaker in a fictional realm is likely to shape the listener's – or the reader – empathetic approach to his or her particular condition.

It is highly strange in Murdoch's novel that her protagonist has to claim the truth through a fictional instrument. This statement refers to the protagonist's own autobiographical story where it has become discernible that the narrative is not likely to represent the objective reality thoroughly. Therefore, the problem for the protagonist as the narrator who claims the truth is that imitative literature “has always created illusions, not literal truths; it has always utilized conventions, no matter what it might choose to imitate – that is, to create” (Hutcheon, 1980; 42). And finally, as his story is a textual reproduction, even the protagonist himself questions that it may not be a reliable portrayal for the reader even though his actual intention is to entrap the reader through a highly manipulative narrative. Because of this apparent indecisiveness, he meaningfully inquires and asks the following questions: “What sort of picture of me has my reader received? I fear it must lack definition, since as I have never had any strong sense of my own identity, how can I characterize sharply that which I can scarcely apprehend” (Murdoch, 2003; 135)

#### IV. Conclusion

This study has made a close reading of the fictional narrative of one of Murdoch's most interestingly created protagonists in order to figure out whether the protagonist, in one way or another, manipulates the reader's empathy with him. And if the protagonist does this, this study has attempted to demonstrate how and why he accomplishes manipulation under the guidance of selected theoretical discussions about the term empathy. What has become clear now in the novel is the special case that the protagonist significantly needs the reader who is already assumed to be convinced of his honesty as the speaker in the

text. The protagonist believes that as he is able to reconstruct the actual past events that he has experienced in his story, a true perspective of his personal history as a middle-aged novelist is coming into existence. In other words, he believes that an artistic representation, which is intentionally orchestrated by himself, can outline the truth in a manipulated form for the reader comprehensively. Sometimes in the story, nevertheless, the protagonist himself finds a paradox in the depiction of objective reality in art. He relatively remarks that art will eventually colour the truth itself.

It has also become obvious that the representation of truth – although the protagonist displays manipulative motives – now fails to become objective as it is getting increasingly difficult to differentiate between fact and fiction. The representation of truth through fictional narratives, a literary text in this case, is so problematic that the artist himself may not be sure enough to maintain the portrayal of truth through a single perspective. In addition to this, the very existence of other narratives in the novel effectively challenges the main narrative perspective by providing alternative narrative consciousnesses. The reader, whom the protagonist wants to rely on in his manipulative story, is thus provided with alternative points of view about the same events so that the main narrative persona can be significantly subverted, which highlights his real intention.

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