



Uluslararası Sosyal Araştırmalar Dergisi
The Journal of International Social Research
Volume: 3 Issue: 13 Year: 2010
WOMAN STUDIES (Special Issue)

THE FREEPLAY OF SIGNIFIERS : CONFLICTS OF GOOD AND EVIL

Feryal ÇUBUKÇU*

Abstract

British critic Frank Kermode (2003:237) claims that the meaning of a novel can be categorized into two essential components: manifest senses and latent senses; the latent sense is the key to get the ultimate significance of the story consisting of the underlying secrets, but it is usually disregarded by the readers, who only comprehend the surface meaning. Murdoch, the novelist and the philosopher, unexceptionally fills her works with the sets of floods of barriers and riddles, deepens the theme, the senses of the story and makes it difficult for the readers to comprehend her works meticulously. She acknowledges that once works have entered the reader's domain of comprehension, then they stop belonging exclusively to the author. She agrees that people can have different interpretations, and there are some interpretations she would welcome; however, in the end it is not the author, but it is readers who are going to decide what the work means (Evans 1989:153). The questing reader rather than the writer becomes more of the focus in the recent years, paving the way for deconstruction of which attention to language and textuality, to reading strategies, subjectivity and the constitution of knowledge demonstrates the pervasiveness of play in discourse. This study seeks to display how the novels of Iris Murdoch, *The Unicorn* and *The Time of the Angels* engage in the deconstructive reading.

Key Words: Deconstruction, Psychoanalysis, Murdoch.

Jean Paul Sartre (1978: 33) believes that art is a flight for some; it is a means of conquering for another. One of the chief motives of artistic creation is certainly the need of feeling that we are essential in relationship to the world. The questing reader rather than the writer becomes more of the focus in the recent years, paving the way for deconstruction of which attention to language and textuality, to reading strategies, subjectivity and the constitution of knowledge demonstrates the pervasiveness of play in discourse. The following discussion seeks to display how the novels *The Unicorn* and *The Time of the Angels* engage in the deconstructive reading.

Deconstruction may be regarded as a philosophical position, a political or intellectual strategy or a mode of reading following Kierkegaard's concentration on uncertainty and incompleteness, Nietzsche's attention to the play of differences in language and Wittgenstein's emphasis upon the open endedness of language games. The mastermind Derrida refocuses critical attention upon reading practice and knowledge claims by analysing textuality. He highlights the movement by saying that one could play the absence of the transcendental signified as the limitlessness of play, that is to say, as the destruction of ontotheology and the metaphysics of presence. Offering the play of difference with its notions of infinite substitutions and endless deferral, he asserts that different readings constitute the chain of signifiers in an endless play of substitutions, they will not be considered right or wrong but rather interesting or not interesting, useful or not useful. Attending so closely to the operations of language in a text itself besieged by proliferating contexts, deconstruction destabilizes the sign.

Lentricchia (1981:137) states that latency in texts is activated in reading, "once again , the text is not the book, it is not confined in a volume itself; it does not suspend reference to history, to the world, to reality, to being, and especially not to the other, they always appear in an experience, in a movement of

* Doç. Dr., Dokuz Eylül University, Faculty of Education, English Language Teaching Department, cubukcu.feryal@gmail.com

interpretation which contextualizes them according to a network of differences and hence of referral to the other, is surely to recall the alterity is irreducible. As to the close reading, Culler's six strategies (2000) can be restated as four:

- deconstruction of oppositions via their inversion and interrogation;
- persistent analysis of figures that combine different arguments or values;
- attention to the marginal and secondary with particular emphasis upon the play of supplementarity;
- consideration of exclusions that may be reinscribed to elucidate not only the operations of power but also meanings.

Deconstruction's concentration on gaps and undecideability lets the readings have much to offer. The novels *The Unicorn* and *The Time of the Angels* by Iris Murdoch have so many gaps that readers cannot help filling in the void as the narrators give the perspectives from their own views following the gothic elements. The opening pages reflecting the dark, cold and gloomy rectory have overtones of Gothic horror. Carel Fisher who speaks the first word about lighting the fire in Elizabeth's room seems to be just a voice and he is identified with darkness although he is a minister of the church. He stands in sharp contrast with his good brother, Marcus, his daughter Muriel, his mistress and servant Pattie, his daughter and mistress Elizabeth. Carel's problem is that he does not believe in God, he believes that if there is no god, there is all the more need for a priest. Carel is the dark opposite to goodness, to morality. However, this darkness is presented bit by bit towards the end of the novel. For Muriel, there is always an area of darkness in her relationship with her father. Carel might seem to have sold his soul to Satan like Faust but he is the only person associated with love. Pattie loves him completely, his daughters love him, his brother loves him. After his final encounter with him, Marcus finds himself "in a condition which could only be described as being in love with Carel" (192). Although Muriel lets him die in the end, she confesses that she loved her father and she had loved him only (221).

Carel seems not to belong to the material world (Spear, 1995:59). He belongs inside the Rectory, which is his prison, his Gaze castle in *The Unicorn*, and he imprisons Elizabeth by an act of will similar to that which holds Hannah at Gaze, neither he nor Elizabeth goes outside the doors and no one from outside is allowed in; when others from inside-Pattie, Muriel, Leo, go out, they are enveloped in fog ; when outsiders wish to come in, Rectory is concealed in the dark. This fog and darkness are lifted after Carel's death. Murdoch (1970:70) associates light with good, by claiming that what does seem to make perfect sense in the Platonic myth is the idea of good as the source of light which reveals to us all things as they really are.

The metaphorical significance of darkness is seen in Murdoch's novels to represent an absence of good, breeding a secrecy which obscures reality. Carel will never face the light of day just like Hannah, which suggests the latent hostility. When Eugene and Pattie go out together from the Rectory, there is a pervading sense of happiness.

The huge echoing light, the dense feel of the Stone, the hastening movement of the wide river, the glittering arc of buildings low upon the horizon, dazed and transported. He felt himself the centre of some pure transparent system, infinitely spinning, infinitely still. There was no place in this limpid universe where darkness could hide. He said "Pattie, I feel so full of joy, I hardly know where I am". (147)

Eugene offers Pattie a selfless love, which makes no demands on her and a moral love through marriage. This scene is followed by the entrance of Carel, wearing dark glasses to obscure the sun and demanding that the curtains should be pulled across so that he is protected from the glare of the sun. The love scene between Pattie and Carel contrasts with the previous happy scene between Pattie and Eugene. For thirteen years, she has been devoted to Carel as if he were the Lord God but when she learns of his incestuous relationship with his daughter Elizabeth, she deserts him and goes to work in an African refugee camp fulfilling her dream of dedicating herself to the service of humanity.

In both works Murdoch's claustrophobic overtones are felt, readers are torn between two worlds, unsure of the demarcation line between the tangible and what lies beyond, between the ordered and chaotic. Murdoch tries to present the philosophic concept of good and how it can exist even without belief in God. Like Rectory in *The Time of the Angels*, Gaze Castle in *The Unicorn* represents a trapped world for the characters whose escape appears to be impossible until the spell is broken and the characters

Hannah, Peter and Gerald die. Death seems to be the only way to get out of this dark world. Murdoch's vague demarcation is more apparent in *The Unicorn*. Till the end of the book, readers are at a loss as to whether Marian, the governess, views the house correctly or not. For her the castle exudes terror. The Gothic quality of the surroundings impinge themselves graphically upon her mind:

The car bumped over a jangling cattle-grid and through an immense crenellated archway: A Lodge cottage with blank gaping windows and a sagging roof stood in a wilderness of wind torn shrubs. The uneven gravel track, devastated by rain and weeds, wound away to the left, circling upward toward the house (16)

Once inside Gaze Castle, her feelings of fear intensify and we have a similar situation as in Rectory in *The Time of the Angels* : “the floors were mostly uncarpeted, tilting, creaking, echoing, but there were soft hangings above her head, curtains in archways and vague cobwebby textiles” (17).

Hannah lives in a world of shadows after unsuccessfully trying to kill her husband seven years ago. Marian appears to be bewitched and held captive once she comes there to accompany Hannah as a governess. She becomes a character who is scared of going out of the garden and who feels bound by Gaze Castle. She thinks even the grass on the cliff is cold and attentive, visible yet unreal, waiting to see what she would do.

Marian has difficulty in understanding Hannah's captivity for seven years. Is she like an angel or a demon? With Carel, characters have had the vague impressions about his being good or bad but as to Hannah, it is both characters and readers who are at a loss to label her. Marian cannot understand the spiritual dimension of Hannah's captivity. Marian is like a catalyst in the novel who is an outsider, who changes and destroys life at Gaze. The narrators, Marian and Effingham, reflect the events in the novel but readers need to be careful to piece the story as the story has more than one level.

On the face of it, the novel gives us an impression that the heroine Hannah is the incarnation of kindness, innocence, victim, obedience and purity, as it were, the unicorn, as the title suggests and as some critics comment (Zhuo & Hong Jing 2007) . Is it indeed the case? On reflection, it seems to be just the opposite. When readers hear the event that took place 7 years ago, Hannah seems to be a frantic woman, an egoist, and an abnormal daydreamer. She is exactly the betrayer of the lily-white image of the unicorn. In mythology, the unicorn is depicted as a glorious white horse with a goat's beard and a long twisted horn that is white at the base, black in the center, and red on the tip, projecting out of its forehead. The unicorn is used to represent chastity, fierceness, virginity, and meekness, but also has religious significance in connection with the Virgin Mary and Jesus. In a word, the unicorn stands for purity and innocence. However, throughout the book, the duality occurs as to whether there is a relevance between Hannah and the image of the unicorn. At times she looks a scapegoat and at the other times she is portrayed as the opposite of what the unicorn generally symbolizes.

Hannah's violent tendency of killing her husband is the initial reflection of her frantic nature. At the end of the story, when cornered , Hannah, like a cat on a hot brick, shoots Gerald to death and drowns herself helplessly, which shows the outburst and consequence of her seven-year accumulating of hatred, resentment and fierceness as a frantic woman. Hannah's egocentric motivation is flexibly concealed by her image of being a weak victim and her strategies to tempt her spiritual slaves. As the story progresses, Murdoch gradually reveals Hannah's psychology and seemingly attractive actions to us: her enjoying playing everybody on her hand in her castle, “I think he would let me kill him slowly” (43); “Hannah had complained playfully that Gerald was neglecting her, and Marian had had the thought that Gerald was avoiding her” (50); her liking to see everybody develop a strong and helpless passion for her and being successfully lured by her, in Effie's mind, Hannah was the only one, the great phoenix, his truth, his home, his mythology. Hannah behaves so just because she wants to keep her throne, her territory, and her mysterious image of being others' God as Carel does, which can be achieved only under the circumstance that she could freely manipulate everybody's will, takes up their entire thought and penetrates into the core of their life. Hannah's devotion and love to others, and her seeming hopelessness are the protective cover of her tricks to get well towards her set objective. For this, she even sacrifices herself as a great whore who has already spoilt her precious virginity: if Pip can be partially excluded, then Effie and Gerald are the sharp target of dallying with, of exploiting and taking advantage of. In this point, Hannah is mad, wicked and cruel beyond forgiving and condoning. She, like a treacherous witch, makes the most of her magic to control everyone in or within touch with her in order to fulfill her unspeakable purpose. As she confesses to Marian herself, “A dream. Do you know what part I have been playing? That of God. And you know what I have been really? Nothing, a legend” (218); “I have lived on my audience, on my

worshipper. I have lived by their thoughts, by your thoughts—just as you have lived by what your thoughts were about me. And we have deceived each other” (219); “I have even battered upon you like a secret vampire” (219). Hannah’s confession is the answer to all the scattered riddles in the novel, just like the lighthouse on the dark sea. She succeeds in accomplishing this: finally all the people who love her and concern her gradually succumb to her power and spell compulsively. Everybody bows to and is obsessed with her, regarding her as an elegant goddess and loses the power to judge and see through her. If Effie is an egoist only mentally because he just takes something for granted (for example, his illusion that the maid Mary has a passion for him), then Hannah is an utter egoist both in spirit and in action. All what she does is completely for herself, for an abnormal dream, for a lost cause of casting the role of “that of God...a legend” (218).

The duality in the novel is expressed by Max Lejour when he equates Hannah with a scapegoat, linking her with Christ. The title is associated with the Christ figure and Virgin Mary. So Hannah is both a mythological figure and a real human being. We are all prisoners in morals (97) and freedom is a flimsy idea not as a cure for the ills of oppression. Murdoch’s characters are not so free in the novels and only the deaths of the main characters Carel and Hannah release the others. Hannah, who has broken her marriage vows to her husband Peter by accepting Pip Lejour as her lover, has brought a terrible vengeance down upon herself but in her enigmatic position as a prisoner she becomes a romantic figure for the others. As a recluse, she lives through her guilt which is finally atoned for in her death. For Denis, she is a Christ figure :” the soul under the burden of sin cannot flee. What is enacted with her is enacted with all of us in one way or another. You cannot come between her and her suffering ... it is too complicated ...”(65). The multiple deaths of Hannah and Leo’s committing suicide, Gerald being shot by Hannah and Peter’s being drowned by Denis, lead the other characters to go back to normality, to the real world.

Johnson (1987) is ill at ease with many of Murdoch's female characters and the obvious absence of any female voice throughout the fiction, noting the "slightly chilly detachment" the author maintains, especially toward the women in the Gothic novels. She argues that Murdoch is attempting to exorcise her own uncomfortable feelings about female oppression in these novels, calling *The Time of the Angels* a nightmare of the abuse of patriarchal authority. But although she suggests that Murdoch consciously attempts to ironize the male writer's tendency to textualize women, she also admits that Murdoch colludes in the very process of textualization. Murdoch's ambivalent treatment of women simply does not permit an exclusively feminist interpretation of female characters. Johnson ends her study with an excellent chapter on Murdoch's conclusions, emphasizing the ways in which the typical Murdochian ending undermines the realistic fictional structures that precede it. She observes that the novels refuse to end, instead opening the text to a potential variety of actions by the characters and different interpretations by its readers. Murdoch's world is a decentered world, Johnson argues, in which the author constantly questions the centrality of masculine assumptions while enacting the need to define the center. Although Murdoch cannot finally be claimed as a feminist writer, her skeptical vision of the social and ethical systems and probings of the unexplored regions of the psyche parallel the feminist desire to reread and revise the world. Johnson's book testifies to the fact that Murdoch's fiction is too complex and ambivalent to accommodate any critical approach, however sound it is; and Johnson's refusal to transform Murdoch into a feminist writer for the purposes of her argument is commendable.

In the opening pages of *Sovereignty of Good*, Iris Murdoch (1970) tries to place herself into a category by saying that there are certain facts, essential to moral philosophy, that have been forgotten, with the result that moral theorizing has gone off course. One of the important facts which Murdoch mentions is that love is a central concept in morals. The sort of moral theory to which she objects typically promotes the universal over the particular, action over character, and the impersonal over the personal. The Kantian insistence that moral agents must follow rules causes us to be insufficiently attentive to other individuals: differing from one another, people warrant different treatment. Furthermore, a Kantian moral agent is too self-absorbed, since his actions focus on himself instead of others. Murdoch objects to rule-oriented moral theories because they employ a mere caricature of a moral agent’s concerns and they provide an inaccurate account of practical reason. By contrast, Murdoch holds that normative moral theorists must make room for the worth of inner experience. The distinctive feature of ethical particularism is skepticism with regard to absolute moral rules. Because virtue theorists are primarily concerned with the development and possession of moral character, they are often thought to reject moral rules. Her characters Hannah, Carel, Gerald and Peter are the people with different moral values. But all these characters have something in common: love. Modern moral theorists are only

concerned with what is publicly observable; they have no place for questions such as “Who should I be”, or “What sort of life is best?” In denying the significance of the inner, of emotion and perception, modern moral theorists make the notion of moral character superfluous. Murdoch (1970: 5) claims that Wittgenstein has created a void into which neo-Kantianism, existentialism, utilitarianism have made haste to enter. And notice how plausibly the arguments, their prestige enhanced from undoubted success in other fields, seem to support, indeed impose, the image of personality which I have sketched above. As the “inner life” is hazy, largely absent, and as it is not part of the mechanism, it turns out to be logically impossible to take up an idle contemplative attitude to the good. Morality must be action since mental concepts can only be analyzed genetically. Morality, with the full support of logic, abhors the private. The real bearer of significance is what is public.

The idea of the good remains indefinable and empty so that human choice may fill it. The sovereign moral concept is freedom, will, power. The concept inhabits a quite separate top level of human activity since it is the guarantor of the secondary values created by choice. Murdoch’s characters display their will and choices in their actions. Hannah wishes to stay captive in the castle and Carel is happy keeping these two mistresses: Pattie and Elizabeth. Act, choice, decision, responsibility, independence are emphasized in this philosophy of puritanical origin and austerity (Schauber 2001).

In *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, Murdoch (1993:179) claims that one may, of course, learn bad habits as well as good, and that too is a matter of quality of consciousness. Concern for the aesthetic awareness of consciousness sparks Murdoch’s critiques of literary theories and quasi-philosophical approaches to writing and literature that ignore or conceal the necessity of applying one’s intellect to the contingent world. She discerns the specter of determinism in concepts which place the process of writing into a separate, virtual reality. To Murdoch, writing is harmed by the felt loss of “ordinary everyday truth, that is of truth”. Within the irreducibility of contingent reality “the life of morality and truth exists” (490).

Therefore, we can apparently see Hannah and Carel are absolutely far qualified to act as the roles of the unicorn and angel respectively but a sharp contrast of the image of unicorn and angel, which is only an imaginary veil or ring of light decorated by their followers on their heads. These people are ignorantly and totally deceived, spelled and lured by the charming, fragile appearance and shining disguises in daily life. The unicorn, a beckoning non-existing beast, as the title indicates, is the key to make a deep comprehension of the novel, and the implicit condensation of the theme testified through the tragedy of Hannah. That is, human beings are not isolated free choosers, monarchs of all we survey, but benighted creatures sunk in a reality whose nature we are constantly and overwhelmingly tempted to deform by fantasy (Magill 1991). British critic Frank Kermode (2003:237) divides the meaning of a novel into two categories: manifest senses and latent sense; the latter, the “secrets” lying in every novel is the key to get the ultimate significance of the story, but is usually disregarded by the readers, who only comprehend the surface meaning. Murdoch, the novelist and the philosopher, unexceptionally sets floods of barriers and riddles for the novel which deepens the theme and senses of the story and gains in difficulty for the readers to comprehend deeply. She acknowledges that once works have entered the reader's ken they stop belonging exclusively to the author: "Yes, people can have different interpretations, and there are some interpretations I would welcome ... [but] in the end it's persons other than the author who are going to decide what the work means." (Evans 1989:153)

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