



Intertextuality and Parody in Iris Murdoch's *The Unicorn*

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Abstract

This study discusses the way Murdoch uses intertextuality in *the Unicorn* (1963) to draw the reader's attention to the textual nature of reality by portraying characters who form their self constructed notions of reality through hackneyed literary conventions. It, additionally discusses Murdoch's self-conscious application of formulaic types such as chivalric romance and fairy tale and the critical function of parody in this novel. Murdoch's use of intertextuality in *the Unicorn*, draws the reader's attention to the textual nature of reality in a double sense: the one created by the author, in the telling of the story, and the other, an effect of the self-deluding characters themselves. Each character's textualized, delusive version of reality, parodies not only the author's tendency to impose Gothic, chivalric romance and fairy-tale conventions on the contingency of life, but the reader's credulity in comprehending life accordingly.

Keywords: parody, intertextuality, metafiction, fairy-tale, courtly love

1. Introduction

Murdoch's fiction has been noted for intertextuality as well as self-conscious adaptation of myth, fairytale, literary allusions, and literary forms that draw attention to themselves in the contribution they can make to constructing a web of fantasy for the characters. In some of her novels, such as *the Unicorn* (1963), Murdoch portrays individuals who form their notions of reality through hackneyed literary conventions. *The Unicorn* represents an elaborate parody of the interrelated human general tendencies to contrive unfeasible fiction on the one hand, and, on the other, to comprehend reality, through the same deterministic conventions of story-telling. The novel includes both covert and overt references to different texts, genres, and various modes of cultural discourse in a way that in reading this novel, reader comes across various literary, popular, and cultural modes of discourse. Murdoch's application of intertextuality in *the Unicorn* reflects humans' general tendency to comprehend both literature and life, or fiction and reality, through hackneyed narrative conventions. This study, accordingly, discusses Murdoch's self conscious application of some of these formulaic types (chivalric romance and fairy tale) and the critical function of parody in this novel. Before starting with the analysis of the novel, it is important to briefly discuss the function of intertextuality and parody in fiction.

Contemporary literary theories have pointed out the essential intertextual nature of all literary texts. As Graham Allen (2011) ^[1] observes, in addition to choosing words from language system, writers "select plots, generic features, aspects of character, images, ways of narrating...from the literary texts and from the literary tradition" (11). Each particular text, in one way or another, refers back to previous texts. As Linda Hutcheon has mentioned "intertextuality is the very condition of textuality" (1988:128). Among the different instances of intertextuality, a prominent one is parody which as Simon Dentith (2000) ^[4] has stated "is one of the many forms of intertextual allusion out of which texts are produced" (6). Parody is a widely used literary device which serves variety of

purposes such as mocking critique and breaking the narrative frame to highlight the typical attitude of incredulity toward conventions of literary realism. In this way, the "familiar literary structures are deliberately made more complex and even confusing" for the reader (Margaret. A. Rose 1976: 35) ^[13]. It can also be used as a self-conscious device to foreground each text's dependence on previous texts.

Though metafiction and parody are together associated with the practice of post-modern novelists, it is still important to distinguish between these terms. Not all metafictional texts are considered parodic. Patricia Waugh (2001) ^[20] defines metafiction as the attempt to "explore a theory of fiction through the practice of writing fiction" (2). Generally speaking, metafiction is concerned with the problem of representation of reality in fiction. Metafiction often expresses the theoretical and ideological uncertainties regarding fictions' ability to reflect objective reality. Unlike the realist novelists who use the conventions of novel to convince the reader of the reality of their fictional world by creating an illusion of reality, writers of metafiction often write in a self-conscious way to disrupt the illusion and remind their readers of the fictionality of their narrative conventions. Metafiction, in this sense, serves "to lay bare" the characteristic devices of classic realism such as point of view, characterisation, fate or chance and, temporal verisimilitude etc. A further point to note is the difference between metafictional self-consciousness and self-reflexivity that, though are often used interchangeably, are not exactly the same. According to Linda Hutcheon (1984) ^[7], "overtly" self-reflective fiction draws "the reader's attention to the story-telling process" (9). In this type of fiction, the reader is invited to regard the writing process "as an event within the novel" (12). In the "covert" type, on the other hand, self-reflexivity is left implicit, i.e. there is no direct appeal to the reader's awareness of narrative conventions. Therefore, as Hutcheon points out "such a text is [implicitly] self-reflective but not necessarily self-conscious" (7).

Due to Murdoch's application of some elements of narrative self-reflexivity in some of her novels, critics have been

concerned with locating her within the contemporary thought. Her novels are sometimes labelled as metafiction. Yet, what distinguishes Murdoch's type of metafiction from the practice of post-modern metafictional novelists is her particular use of parody. According to Jack Stewart (2002) ^[15], in *the Unicorn* Murdoch uses metafiction "to expose the fiction making illusion of her characters" (77). Murdoch's parodic style differs from the post-modernists' notion of breaking the fictional frame to suggest the death of realism in novel. In other words, rather than denying the possibility of reflecting reality in fiction as post-modern novelists reputedly attempt to do, Murdoch's novels ironically exploit fictionality, in order to expose the dangers of fictional approach to reality. Thus, what is targeted in her novels is not the generic conventions of the novels themselves, or not only these, but the character's and the reader's reliance on those conventions to perceive the reality of other people. Murdoch's application of metafictional parody highlights the problematic nature of subjectivity, the role of various modes of cultural discourse in constructing and perceiving reality and the potential hazards of obsessive adherence to such modes of perception. Consequently, her involvement with these motifs exposes the dangers of fictionality in life, which as Murdoch herself has asserted, happens when "people [who] create myths about themselves, are then dominated by the myths (quoted in Patricia Waugh 2010: 118).

2. *The Unicorn* as Parody

The Unicorn is a perfect example of Murdoch's application of self-conscious intertextuality for parodic reasons. *The Unicorn* presents a fairy-tale story of marital betrayal and a seven years' curse centred on the story of Hannah who has been incarcerated by her husband. What is noteworthy in this novel is the way characters attempt to ascribe meaning to Hannah's story by the use of various narrative conventions. For one thing, there is some degree of narrative self-consciousness in the novel. The characters in *the Unicorn*, additionally, take upon themselves the author's task: they create fictional roles for themselves and for other characters. Even the novel's sensationalistic ending is brought about by their subconscious awareness of generic conventions.

Over the novel as a whole, Hannah is variably described by the other characters as the spellbound, Sleeping Beauty of fairy-tales, a religious symbol, the idolized beauty of courtly love, a Platonic symbol of beauty and embodiment of the Greek concept of Ate, "the automatic transfer of suffering" (*the Unicorn* 135). To the other characters, Hannah functions as a text to be read according to literary and cultural codes, based on the reader's expectations. Each character attempts to read Hannah's story after his or her own fashion. Hannah becomes an example of a character fitted into pre-conceived models to satisfy the reader's expectations. Evidently, the models change from one character to another. The different versions of Hannah's plight, however, offer a myriad of competing interpretations that have one thing in common: the meaning of her suffering. Hannah's story is, in fact, a projection of all the other character's unfulfilled wishes and fantasies. Thus, the novel parodies the narcissistic impulses of readers who seek a projection of their own fantasies in a text. Each character's version of reality reflects the reader's attempt to understand the text through fairy-tale and courtly love conventions, or the attempt to communicate in terms of symbolic-allegorical

discourse. The different interpretations of the meaning of Hannah, parody the various, often stereotypical, ways readers tend to read and perceive fictional characters. It problematizes and ultimately de-familiarizes the act of interpretation through the use of characters who perform as types of the narcissistic readers, who try to interpret Hannah's story through the respective lenses of myth, fairy-tale, Gothic romance, religion and philosophy according to their own spiritual and psychological needs. Hannah is certainly a spell-bound prisoner and she suffers for it. Yet the real spell cast on her is the spell of myth and legend which is deeply rooted in each individual's literary and cultural subconscious. Her entrapment in Gaze Castle represents reader's tyrannical tendency to read fictional characters through the conditioning lens of clichés. In other words, by portraying characters who deliberately cast themselves and others in stock roles and indulge themselves in stock predictable responses, Murdoch parodies the archetypal readers' automatic understanding of the text as defined by literary and cultural conventions. Thus, through an ironic treatment of the other characters' efforts to interpret Hannah's story, Murdoch foregrounds the act of reading. Jack Stewart has aptly described the novel as "an allegory of reading" which uses elements of metafiction: "laying bare mythicizing impulses in author and characters" (78). Thus, in interpreting Hannah's story, characters in *the Unicorn* act as "surrogate readers" (Stewart 2002: 91) ^[15]. The novel foregrounds the act of interpretation. In reading the novel, the reader has to deal with two fictions. The first one is about Hannah and the story of her infidelity and imprisonment in Gaze Castle. The second fiction, in a larger sense, further includes all the other characters' propensity to interpret Hannah's story based on cultural and literary models.

The Unicorn can also be read in terms of a parody of the novelist's problems regarding their application of genres and conventions of writing fiction including plot, characterization and selection of appropriate form. According to Murdoch, in the search for "consolation", the novelist is often attracted to a type of "closed", "clean crystalline work" which ultimately poses a "danger to our sense of reality" in so far as it distorts our perceptions of reality ("Against Dryness", 1961: 15). In this sense, form becomes a kind of "false consolation", or a "false god" in the temptation that it represents for the novelist in the face of his or her inherent tendency to falsify reality. Of similar importance is the novelist's dilemma between creating realistic, contingent characters and the temptation to turn them into symbolic representation of ideas. Through the ironic and ludic use of genre, *The Unicorn* reveals what happens when the laws of contingency in motivating actions are replaced by ideological and literary conventions. As it happens in Hannah's case, character turns into a "false god". Hannah is an instance of a character with no "inside", a "hollow" woman. Her representational quality is highly disturbing for readers for the very reason that she is being constantly re-read and re-created by other characters based on their fantasies. In fact, Hannah is a fictional character in a double sense. As a character in a novel she is created by the author. She is also a projection of the other characters' fantasies. In this sense, the novel includes two kinds of narrative: the one projected by the characters themselves and the one created by the author.

Another noteworthy point to be discussed about this novel is its dénouement when Jamsie and Marian decide to unlock the door to Hannah's room which as they were well aware of its

catastrophic consequences, leads to her death. This reflects the boredom of the reader who craves closure for a much delayed action and their impatience regarding the fulfilment of their expectations based on the novel's generic conventions. The characters in the novel are all bored by the prolonged "vigil" as they are awaiting Peter's fateful return. Consequently, they take upon themselves what is traditionally considered to be the author's task: to figure out a satisfying closure for the messy events at the center of plot. For with Hannah's second act of adultery, this time with Gerald, the events at Gaze Castle indeed take a nasty turn. What would her repentance and suffering mean if she is to simply give herself in to diabolic Gerald? After all, Peter's return is noted as a false alarm and all the character's proposed return to their previous posts, as suggested by Gerald, would start another "pattern of magical event", senseless entrapment and meaningless suffering. This is another "turn of the screw" which would involve them all in a new cycle of suffering; and who would choose to suffer with Hannah when her much-discussed suffering is simply termed so to satisfy all the other character's narcissistic fantasies? So as her housekeeper, Violet Evercreech, aptly says, they are all like some people "sitting out the end of some rather tedious film" (259). Each one is anxious to bring the story to an end.

The seven years spell has to be broken no matter how catastrophic it turns out to be. Hannah's story needs to end so that all can be set free to go back to "ordinary" life. With Hannah's departure, "new life could be born" as Marian thinks contentedly. Consequently, in their boredom for action Effingham sleeps with Alice, Marian seduces Denis, Denis kills Peter and Pip Lejour, an ex-lover, shoots himself. This catastrophic closure is, nonetheless, brought about based on reader's expectations regarding generic conventions. The fairy tale prophecy is finally fulfilled. Hannah steps down her prison house. The legend of the seven years spell is broken, leading to a disastrous flood and four deaths. As it was long expected, and vaguely prophesied by the locals, with Hannah's release, violence becomes inevitable. This apocalyptic ending, in a way, gives an eerie credence to the superstitious prophecies about Hannah.

The Unicorn is distinctive, among other things, for an abundant use of stock characters from various traditional modes of narrative such as Gothic, chivalric romance and fairy tale. For instance, Hannah Crean-Smith is the Gothic heroine incarcerated in Gaze Castle by Peter, her monstrously evil husband. Gerald is the Gothic villain who manipulates others through his sexually irresistible charm. Violet Evercreech is the enigmatic housekeeper, rather like the sinister Mrs Danvers in Daphne Du Maurier's Gothic novel *Rebecca* (1939), who guards the door to the secret chamber. Effingham is the chivalric knight whose role is to worship the lady and rescue her. Denis is described as the feudal "page" or the faithful servant, kneeling by the lady's side and serving her whims. He is also described in religious terms as the fisher king, a quality commonly attributed to Christ. Max Lejour is the wise old man with "an oriental air", who through his philosophical commentaries attempts to enlighten the hero. It is ironic and significant, however, that none of the characters are able to live up to these self-projected stereotypical roles. In what follows, I will discuss the intertextual nature of the novel in terms of Murdoch's parodic appropriation of two formulaic forms: chivalric romance and fairy tale.

2.1 *The Unicorn* as Chivalric Romance

The Unicorn can be read in terms of conventions of chivalric romance specifically with regard to the tradition of courtly love. Courtly love tradition is based on an idealistic philosophy of love which was widely used in chivalric romances. The idea is often traced back to Ovid's *Remedies of Love*, and was later developed in medieval Romances such as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, love sonnets of Petrarch, and the Elizabethan sonneteers who followed him. Courtly love represents a spiritual notion of love centred on the exaltation of the beloved to the status of a goddess. The motif of a "damsel in distress" who is to be saved by the knight of honour and bravery and oftentimes takes the form of a perilous quest to rescue the distressed lady, is parodied in Effingham's attachment to Hannah in *the Unicorn*. For Effingham, Hannah represents a character in a romance narrative. Her unresolved situation and imprisonment in Gaze Castle reinforce Effingham's egoistically self-constructed role as a "courtly lover". For him, Hannah is "the castle perilous towards which he had been faring" (103). Even before meeting Hannah in person, the thought of the imprisoned lady "obsessed him romantically". He admits to himself that he was somehow "stripped, prepared, keyed up, attuned, conditioned...to fall in love" (103) with her and when chance finally brings him to Hannah's door, he follows his role step by step as in a script. Accordingly, in their first encounter, he falls for the lady and after two days of restless agitation he re-visits her to declare his love. Hannah is the "castle perilous" which allures the knight and Effingham who fancies himself as one, has no choice but to follow the lead. He is amusingly intrigued by the self-flattering idea of imagining himself as the knight kneeling by the side of the beautiful, distressed lady. When he tries to recall the way things happened in his first meeting with Hannah, he imagines himself to have "fallen literally at her feet and lain there gasping". Yet, Effingham is no true quester in the manner of knights of chivalric romances. His love for Hannah that grows to excess in her proximity, becomes "perfectly serene" in her absence (114). He would rather think of her as a "legendary creature, beautiful unicorn" (134) as the image gives him the thrill of fantastic enchantment and the comfort of inaction. For him Hannah's situation represents a beautiful story which allows him to indulge himself in exotic fantastic adventures. As a result, he somehow rejoices at her stagnant situation. All he actually does regarding Hannah and her "sufferings" is to pay her homage as a "Princess Lointaine", an image of unattainable perfect female beauty.

While Effingham is "haunted" by the thoughts of Hannah's husband, he is briefly horrified by the feasible demands of his new role. Isn't he expected to save the lady? Isn't he supposed to do something to break the "spell"? It is later, however, that he is relieved into grasping his "harmless" role in this story: "He was to be in love with Hannah, he was to be Hannah's servant, he was to come running back whenever he could, he was to be tolerated by everybody, he was to be harmless" (105). So he is to keep on talking about taking her away, without actually doing anything about it. On the other hand, Effingham is anxious to keep the status quo which "had the quality of a wonderful story". He enjoys Hannah's captivity; her being there "for him, shut up, reserved, sequestered" (105). Effingham's crude Oedipal interpretation of the dilemma of his love for Hannah is absurdly reflected in his selfish desire to keep her pure and intact. As he explains later for Alice:

Hannah had been to him the chaste mother-goddess, the Virgin mother. The sin which Hannah was, through her own sinless suffering, redeeming for him had been the sin of his own mother's betrayal of him with his own father. Hannah was the mother who sequestered, immaculate, chaste, the unmoved mover. Because of his unconscious resentment of his own mother's sin of sex, he had been, he explained, unable to establish any satisfactory relations with women other than those of *Courtly Love*. He would identify the woman he loved with his mother and then make her unapproachable and holy (286). Hannah's final act of adultery and murder, nevertheless, destroys his "chaste" fantasy or what he later calls "a psychological masquerade". When she finally yields to Gerald's dark seductive power, and as Gerald is carrying her to his room to complete his plan, Effingham watches with dismay and disgust Hannah's "head resting quietly against Gerald's shoulder, her eyes wide open" (229). For Effingham, Hannah is a spiritual being, or a "nun" who suddenly "broke her vows"; a "Princesse Lointaine" transformed into a frail, fallen woman. Effingham's fascination with Hannah lies in her being distant and unattainable and when this fantasy is shattered, momentarily, he turns to Marian for comfort. And later he decides that he needs Alice to be "his crucifix, his redeemer" against Hannah's magical influence. It is as if his love for Hannah has its perverse roots in "necromancy" and with his newly gained awareness of Alice and what he assumes to be her reality, the spell is broken. Yet, even then, he is not capable of perceiving Alice as a person. In his fanciful mind, she is "metamorphosed" into another being a "fish-like sea goddess, brooding since antiquity in some watery hole" (240).

Following Alice to the sea pool, and as he is lost in this "ritual of actions", all he can feel is the intensity of "sexual desire". The redeeming power of the magic kiss is, thus, vulgarised as he kisses "the new Alice". Like in his other games of make-believe chivalry and romance, this fantasy is, nonetheless, short-lived. As Zohreh Sullivan (1977) ^[16] contends, Effingham's feeling for Alice can be defined in terms of "self-protection" against Hannah's enchanting influence and his own sense of responsibility towards Hannah (65). It is like a "spell repeated backwards" as he admits to himself. It is interesting to note that Effingham treats love in terms of a ritual of purification as he attaches himself to different women in order to be chastised not by any genuine human affection but by a parasitical sense of attachment which feeds on their supposed reality.

The same pattern is repeated in Marian's brief affair with Denis before Hannah's suicide. Marian calls it that type of "unclassifiable encounter that liberates" (248). It is as if Hannah's surrender to Gerald is another act of sacrifice which frees them all and so "beautifully sent them all away in their different directions" (251) to meet their happiness. For Effingham and Marian, as for the other characters in this novel, individuals and their affections are reduced to a set of roles and defined in hackneyed terms. Characters and their parasitical notion of love are described in terms of "vampires", who live "on the sorrows" of others. Hannah is particularly associated with bats and vampirism. As she eventually confesses to Marian all those seven years she "battered" on her admirers "like a secret vampire" (270).

In the enchanted circle of Hannah's worshippers, love needs to be defined and categorized in romantic, religious or philosophical terms. So, according to Marian and Effingham,

sending Hannah away with Gerald turns out to be not a bad idea after all. It pairs them off happily: Marian with Denis and Effingham with Alice. Only in this way, Hannah's sins and sacrifice make sense. Yet, the "happily ever after" formula that Effingham and Marian so desperately endeavour to fit into their own life, as with the other characters, fails eventually. Hannah commits suicide and leaves all her property for Alice's father, Max Lejour. A "grotesque and hideous" act, (309) Effingham calls it. He had always had trouble placing the old man in Hannah's story. Max's interest in Hannah "frightened" him. For Effingham, Hannah is a story which only belongs to him. Max's sudden entrance in this story contradicts Effingham's narcissistic role. Thus, the dénouement is not to his taste. He calls Hannah's unexpected decision at the end of the story "a vulgar trick", as he sees as having turned herself into "a piece of property" (305). Not surprisingly, Effingham is anxious to absent himself from the scene as soon as possible. With Hannah's death, his "adventure" is over and his little scenario with Alice is merely a minor episode in that larger "adventure". Effingham is a typical example of male egoists such as Charles Arrowby in *The Sea, The Sea* (1978), who liberally populate much of Murdoch's novels. Murdoch's application of free indirect speech in reporting his thoughts and self-justifications enables the reader to have a glimpse of his inner life. His private meditations revolve around his self-aggrandizing role in women's life. Even his near death experience in the bog with its mock-epiphanic overtones is a commentary on his inability to establish and maintain a genuine sense of connection with other people especially women. While some critics regard Effingham's experience as a flicker of hope for the possibility of redemption, Zohreh Sullivan (1977), nonetheless, notes the satiric function of the bog scene. She calls it "an obvious cliché" devoid of fulfilling its enlightening implications for the very reason of its being divorced from a "continuing human situation". According to Sullivan, here "Effingham is falling into the moral bog of seeing love as an absolute existing outside the context of human relationship" (Sullivan, 1977, 64) ^[16]. Thus, the vision of the "perfect love" that he happens to experience momentarily while is sinking in the bog, fades as soon as Denis appears upon the scene to save his life. The whole thing lasts only for a few minutes, then his "old, unregenerate" self is back again. Surrounded by what he assumes to be the "Holy Trinity", Alice, Marian and Hannah, who pour whiskey down his throat, he feels "limp yet glorious, as if he had been reborn, as if he had crawled forth into a new element and lay yet upon the shore, weary but transfigured"; he is, therefore, in a typically contented, inert state, being unable to remember exactly "what he was trying to remember" (213). This episode ironically sums up the nature of his love for Hannah: the fantasy charms him for a while and as he sits in the train on his way back to "the ordinary world" by the end of the story, he is relieved by the idea of how he "would try to forget what he had briefly seen" (325).

2.2 The Unicorn as Fairy-tale

Another form of narrative discourse that is parodied in this novel is that of fairy-tale. In fact, in *the Unicorn*, Murdoch uses fairy-tale motifs to criticize humanity's general tendency to understand life through what Kevin Paul Smith (2007) calls "formulated plot patterns" (58). According to Smith, in the post-modern application of fairy tales, there is a certain type of intertextual allusion which reminds the reader of the

“architectural” elements of fairy tale as a genre instead of specific tales. Among such generic features, he discusses the recurrence of certain types of characters and objects such as the mirror motif, the castle, the entrapped Princess, and indeterminacy with regard to time and place of the events in the story. The later feature, i.e. unspecified setting of time and place, acts counter to the notion of verisimilitude which can be regarded as the backbone of realism in fiction. This separation of the text from a definite historical context serves to highlight the fictional nature of fairy-tales. As Jessica Tiffin (2014) explains, one of the main attributes of such tales is their deliberate “invocation of the unreal” or “self-conscious problematization of mimesis”. Since in reading fairy-tales, the reader does not feel obliged to connect the events, characters and the setting of the story to everyday reality, Tiffin defines such texts as “self-contained artefacts”. On the other hand, since repetition of different motifs and types of characters plays an important part in the construction of these tales, fairy tales are essentially “intertextual, created within the context of the structures of the genre understood through its other exemplars” (Tiffin 2014: 10). In *the Unicorn*, however, it is possible to recognize both echoes of different motifs from fairy-tale as a genre and explicit allusions to certain fairy tale texts. First of all, the novel seems to have no definite time or place, though the setting of place, described as “a very ancient land”, is identified by some critics to be located somewhere in Ireland. Priscilla Martin and Anne Rowe (2010) ^[12] call it “a mythic unidentified Ireland” (84).

Another commonly used fairy-tale element which is prominent in this novel is that of a princess in the castle. In Grimm Brothers’ “Little Briar Rose” (there are older version of the tale such as the one by Charles Perrault which seems to have inspired Grimm’s tale), the king and the queen forget to invite one of the thirteen “wise women”, (fairies), to their new-born’s birthday feast. The offended evil fairy curses the baby Princess, Briar Rose, to die at the age of fifteen by a “prick” of a spindle. The spell, nonetheless, is too strong to be broken by the other well-wishing fairies. One of the good fairies who had not yet offered her gift to the baby, has only the power to channel the curse to the Princess’s good: the “prick” will put her to sleep for one hundred years till she is finally awakened by a Prince. After the fateful incident, when she turns fifteen and as it was prophesied, the Princess, the royal family and other inhabitants of the castle together fall into sleep. As time passes, the incident turns into a legend which drags many young princes to the castle. But they are all perished by the briar thorns which had grown around the castle over the years to protect its inhabitants from unintended intruders. For the spell should only be broken by a certain Prince who is motivated by “true love”.

Critics have suggested the tales’ obvious sexual implications. In Grimm’s tale, the Prince awakens Briar Rose by a kiss. In “the Sun, the Moon, and Talia” which is a much older version of the story by Basile, the Princess is raped by a king while sleeping and gives birth to twins. Feminist critics suggest that the Princess’s sexual availability in her sleeping pose associates “female sexuality with passivity” (Lisa Fiander 2004: 91). Bruno Bettelheim (1976) argues that the Princess’s fifteenth birthday which coincides with puberty is symbolically reflected in the thirteenth evil fairy’s curse, as “menstruation typically occurs with the twenty-eight-day frequency of lunar months” (417). Since in Bible female monthly bleeding is considered as ‘the curse’, “inherited by woman from woman”, Bettelheim

explains that symbolically speaking, “the prick” describes the Princess’s first experience of puberty (419). Thus, as a way to protect her daughter from the consequences of growing up or what Bettelheim calls “premature sexual encounters”, the king orders all spindle wheels to be removed from the kingdom. Yet, he can only postpone the inevitable. Fate decrees that Briar Rose is to be awakened to love at the right time and by the right person. “The ‘curse’ is a blessing in disguise”, Bettelheim says (422).

In *the Unicorn*, there are explicit references to the story of “the Sleeping Beauty”. Hannah’s sleep-like state, for instance, recalls “Briar Rose”. She is referred to as “the Sleeping Beauty” by the other characters. After the unfortunate incident in the bogs where her husband falls over the cliffs and after her subsequent attempt to leave Gaze fails, Hannah is eventually lulled into her stagnant situation. She stops “thinking in terms of time”. Each time Effingham visits Hannah after a period of absence, he expects to find the place unchanged. To him, the events in Gaze are like a “macabre pageant” in “a dream” (124). For Marian, “days [in Gaze Castle] seemed of immense length and their simple pattern already seemed to her monstrous, as if the monotony were inherent” (50). Early at nights, when the inhabitants of the castle retire to bed, she finds herself utterly “exhausted”, unable to read “while not sleepy”. She feels “as if her energy were sapped by simply resisting some influence upon her by her too silent surroundings” (61). She “was amazed at how much they seemed to sleep”. The castle itself which is “hidden by folds of the hill” is described as “silent and sleep” (52). “The mountain peaks and deep ravines, the trees, the honey bees, the wide-winged birds, [seem to have fallen] asleep: like creatures round the castle of the sleeping beauty” (140). Even the “little fire” in Hannah’s room “looks sleepy”. Similar to those princes who died in the attempt to intrude the castle of Briar Rose and awaken the Princess, those characters who try to release Hannah from her prison-house bring down “violence” to the house. Marian, for instance, is obsessed by the “desire to set Hannah free, to smash up all her eerie magical surroundings” (163). The unrealistic, fantastic nature of the events in Gaze is mirrored in Marian’s impression that after Hannah’s withdrawal from the castle, it will cease to exist. Effingham is afraid of the “violence that lay behind the legends of the sleeping beauty” (221) and as “harmless” a lover as he is, he does not want to be the one to “awaken it”.

The reason for Hannah’s imprisonment which is referred to by other characters as her “sin”, is her infidelity toward her husband. In other words, Hannah’s “sin” is of a sexual nature. That is why Marian is sent to “chaperone” her as the seven-years spell draws to an end, to “make sure” Hannah will not be tempted to commit the same mistake this time with Effingham. Effingham tells Hannah that they should do something to break to spell. Even if that means “going to bed” together. But unlike Briar Rose, Hannah is not awakened to love and happiness. The spell is finally broken by Gerald, the villain of the story, who takes her to his bed. He is the one who reveals the truth about/to Hannah, i.e. all those seven years, she “battered” on the other characters “like a secret vampire”. In fact, Hannah is eventually awakened from the “tyrannical dream” of “playing God” by deceiving her “worshippers” into thinking that her suffering (if any) is meaningful (270). Thus, by the end of seven years, after she commits another act of adultery and shoots her seducer, her innocence fades away. “The spiritual veil or haze” (269) is suddenly gone as if many years had passed in just two days.

Fairy tales often reflect a world dominated by fate and magical occurrences such as omens, spells and curses. The fates of heroes and heroines of such tales are often determined by supernatural personages such as fairies, witches and goblins. Sometimes, the hero is warned against performing a certain act the violation of which leads to disastrous consequences. These prohibitions are often referred to as the “curse” or “spell”. The idea of spell and enchantment plays an important role in *the Unicorn*. Almost everyone in the story believe that Hannah is “under a curse” as she is not supposed to leave Gaze Castle. Hannah is compared to a “Circe” or a “Penelope” who keeps men “spellbound” (135). Other characters are similarly fixated on the idea of spells and enchantment. Alice places sea shells on Effingham’s bed to put a spell on him. Effingham defines his relationship with Hannah in terms of spell. Marian imagines that the deceased Gerald will come back any moment to “turn them into swine” (243).

Another widely used fairy-tale element that is prominent in *the Unicorn* is the motif of magic mirror. Based on fairy-tales’ contextual clues, mirrors have a wide range of meanings. They are, for instance, traditionally associated with female vanity. In “the Snow White” the magic mirror represents the evil queen’s vanity. In classical mythology, Venus is associated with a mirror (James Hall 1994: 211). The mirror in Hannah’s room which is described in magical terms represents the illusions of the onlookers. Looking at her own reflection in Hannah’s mirror, Marian sees herself transformed into a beauty as the mirror seems to be “enchanted by so often reflecting the lovely face of its owner” (78). The mirror motif in *the Unicorn*, is also implied in the use of a doubling technique as in the characters merging with, or replicating each other. It, additionally, indicates the different perspectives into Hannah’s story. Hannah is constantly watched as the object of everybody’s gaze. She is concerned with how she appears to others, a character with no internal integrity, as such. That is why she is often defined in terms of clichés rather than genuine human characteristics. As Zohreh Sullivan (1977) ^[16] has pointed out Hannah’s mirror suggest “limitations of vision and distortions of perception” (565). In fact, Hannah herself turns into a mirror which reflects the other characters’ fantasies and desires.

By the end of the story, Hannah eventually manages to “break the mirror”. Similar to Alfred Tennyson’s Lady of Shalott who, doomed to “weave the mirror’s magic sight” (Tennyson), was not supposed to look directly at the reality of the outside world, Hannah had lived by and inside her mirrors for seven years. Her mirrors helped her to sustain the fictional identity which the other characters created for her. When Hannah is, finally forced by circumstances to face her own reality or unreality, “the mirror cracked” (Tennyson) and she finds out that she is no longer able to be “empty” and live on false “consolations” in other characters’ dreams.

Finally, the fairy-tale quality of Hannah’s story is discussed metafictionally by the other characters. In other words, they self consciously attribute the elements of fairy-tale to the events in Gaze Castle. For instance, when Denis tells Marian about the legend of the seven-year spell, she says: “Why seven years? Just because that’s the time things go on for in fairy-tales” (96)? Towards the end of the story, after Hannah shoots Gerald, she asks Marian: “Like in a fairy-tale. Has anyone gone” (265)? Marian wishes to turn Hannah into stone to prevent another cycle of enchantment and captivity. In short, Murdoch’s

application of this metafictional technique supports the main premise of the present study: the various ways narrative conventions can contribute to the construction and projection of self-delusional fantasies. Considering the “essential nonreality of fairy-tale” in Tiffin’s words (2004: 21), this genre seems to be the appropriate narrative mode to explore Murdoch’s warning against the dangers of a fictional approach to reality.

3. Conclusion

As it was discussed in this study, *the Unicorn* is a hybrid text consisting of a mixture of various generic conventions and implicit and explicit references to different texts. However, rather than creating exact parallels between her own novel and other texts, in this novel as in most of her novels, Murdoch incorporates intertextuality to satirize the humanity’s myth-making desires through her characters. In her novels, she often portrays characters who, in Bran Nicol’s words (2004), attempt to “draw comparisons between themselves and their situations and other [textual] sources” (8). In *the Unicorn*, particularly, she uses a mixture of covert and overt intertextuality to preserve fiction’s illusion of reality as a means itself to expose the dangers of comprehending reality through the illusions of fiction. Murdoch’s self-conscious appropriation of different genres, character types and motifs from previous texts leads to the creation of mythical patterns which border on parody as social criticism, rather than being simply an expression of the author’s scepticism towards the mimetic function of fiction.

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