

16. Modern Trickster in Joe Penhall's *Love and Understanding***Kadriye BOZKURT¹****APA:** Bozkurt, K. (2021). Modern Trickster in Joe Penhall's *Love and Understanding*. *RumeliDE Dil ve Edebiyat Araştırmaları Dergisi*, (Ö9), 184-192. DOI: 10.29000/rumelide.981526.**Abstract**

Contemporary English-Australian playwright and screenwriter Joe Penhall's play *Love and Understanding* (2004) depicts the chaos of modern world and the disintegration of the two young doctors Neal and Rachel as lovers because of their busy works and miscommunication. This play also introduces us the lonely and depressive Richie who resembles 'trickster' with his manipulative, narcissistic, self-seeking, tricky character. Trickster as a character in literature and culture is an archetypal figure who mostly appears in many different identities and disguises and adorns with amusing, mischievous and clever personality; moreover, trickster achieves to survive and to arrange all the affairs for his/her own hand. Many well-known personalities such as Dionysus, Pan, Prometheus and Nasreddin Hodja in mythology, literature or folk tales, and Jack Sparrow, The Joker or The Mask in movies can be cited as examples for trickster being cunning, cheater and rogue to some degree. As it will be analysed in this essay, in Penhall's play, Richie can be read as the modern version of trickster with his decadent slyness, hedonism, shallowness and piteous loneliness.

Keywords: Joe Penhall, *Love and Understanding*, Modern world, Trickster**Joe Penhall'un *Aşk ve Anlayış* adlı oyununda modern hilebaz karakter****Öz**

Çağdaş İngiliz-Avusturyalı oyun yazarı ve senarist Joe Penhall'un oyunu *Aşk ve Anlayış* (2004), modern dünyanın karmaşasını ve yoğun iş hayatı ve iletişimsizlik yüzünden sevgili olan iki genç doktor Neal ve Rachel'in ayrılığını resmetmektedir. Oyun ayrıca manipulatif, narsist, çıkarıcı ve düzenbaz karakter ile hilebaza benzeyen yalnız ve depresif Richie karakterini bize tanıtmaktadır. Hilebaz karakter, edebiyatta ve kültürde farklı kimliklerle ve farklı kılıklarla ortaya çıkan arketip bir karakterdir ve eğlenceli, haylaz ve akıllı bir kişiliğe bürünmüştür; dahası hilebaz karakter hayatta kalmayı ve her koşulu kendi çıkarına kullanmayı başarmaktadır. Mitolojide, edebiyatta ve halk hikâyelerinde Dionysus, Pan, Prometheus ve Nasrettin Hoca ve beyaz perdede Jack Sparrow, Joker ve Maske gibi **birçok tanınmış şahsiyet**; belirli ölçüdeki kurnazlıkları, hilekârlıkları ve muziplikleri ile hilebaz karakter için örnek olarak gösterilebilmektedir. Bu makalede inceleneceği üzere, Penhall'un oyununda Richie'yi, ahlak dışı kurnazlığı, hedonizmi, sığılığı ve acınası yalnızlığı ile hilebaz karakterin modern versiyonu olarak okumak mümkündür.

Anahtar kelimeler: Joe Penhall, *Aşk ve Anlayış*, Modern dünya, Hilebaz Karakter

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Introduction

In dictionary, the word 'trickster' finds many meanings; while some of them referring to the ordinary human being's behaviour, in some definitions of trickster it is possible to find supernatural and sub-natural definitions about him/her. As it can be seen, trickster appears as; "1. a deceiver; cheat; fraud, 2. a person who plays tricks, 3. a supernatural figure appearing in various guises and typically engaging in mischievous activities, important in the folklore and mythology of many primitive peoples and usually conceived as a culture hero" (Collins English Dictionary, access 15.02.2021). Trickster in mythology appears as an archetypal figure, in literature as a stock character, and in anthropological work s/he appears as a folkloric figure and cultural hero. So, trickster has been given different names and defined with different qualities accordingly the context in which s/he appeared. In Greek mythology, for instance God Hermes is considered to possess many characteristics attributed to the trickster. In many stories, Hermes is depicted as the messenger between the gods and human beings to herald something, and he is also inventor of fire, the alphabet and musical instruments. Hermes is also very keen on speaking, a good orator and master on languages. Being the god of trade, fertility, sleep, language and thieves, he appears as very cunning and mischievous character who can cheat easily and amusingly and play other ones (Cashford, 2015, p. 123).

In literature, mostly, trickster shows herself/himself as a stock character, of course in modern/postmodern literature becomes more developed character. The clown character in literature in some sense meets the trickster character. Moreover, In Shakespeare's narratives, the character Puck in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1600) or the villain Iago in *Othello* (1603) can be read in terms of their qualifications depicted very suitable for the playfulness of trickster. Rather than being a public hero, here these characters appear as deceiver and cheater, Puck in very amusing way and Iago in a very selfish and manipulative way. However, there are many narratives that meet literature and anthropology in terms of depicting human nature and focusing on the human affairs; these narratives as in the stories of Nasreddin Hodja in Turkish literature depict very amusing and educating experiences of Nasreddin Hodja. These stories unfold the follies of people with fun but not with harshly teasing since the main aim is to both teach and amuse people (Das, 1993, p. 78).

Trickster sometimes appears in the disguise of animal as raven, monkey, hare, fox or rabbit. Coyote, a species of canine, is very famous trickster character in Native American narratives and he has talents on magic, creation and medicine, additionally he is very powerful as being "the head of creatures" (Margot and Clark, 2003, p. 5) and also dominates the geographical formations. Clearly, in almost every culture, it is likely to see trickster characters in many different disguises; as folkloric character, mythologic figure or a character of a literary work; as in Ivan the Fool in Russian folklore, Kumiho in Korean folklore, Krishna in Hindu mythology, Robin Hood in English folklore, Sinbad in Arabian mythology and many others. Even some well-known characters in movies, Jack Sparrow, The Joker or The Mask, can be cited as examples for trickster being cunning, cheater and rogue to some degree. Even though the narratives of these characters can be diverse relatedly their own cultures, they inevitably share some common characteristics, too. Paradoxically these characters can be playful and lovely, amusing and cheating, saver and punisher, educator and liar, conscious and unconscious, lawbreaker and culture creator at the same time. In his work *Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth, and Art* (1999), the scholar Lewis Hyde specifies these characters with these words:

We constantly distinguish- right and wrong, sacred and profane, clean and dirty, male and female, young and old, living and dead- and in every case trickster will cross the line and confuse the distinction. Trickster is the creative idiot, therefore, the wise fool, the gray-haired baby, the cross-dresser, the speaker of sacred profanities. Where someone's sense of honorable behaviour has left

him unable to act, trickster will appear to suggest an amoral action. Trickster is the mythic embodiment of ambiguity and ambivalence, doubleness and duplicity, contradiction and paradox (Hyde, pp. 9-10).

Most of these common characteristics of trickster have been passed down to next generations and in modern times alongside the prevalent and stock trickster characters, new trickster characters are created by adding some extra features peculiar to modern times. In this study, a detailed analysis of the Richie character created by British playwright Joe Penhall (1967-) in his play *Love and Understanding* (1997) is aimed to present the potential modern version of the trickster character. In fact, Richie is a very evident character who can possess both some of the traditional trickster characteristics and modern people's worries and worldview.

Modern Trickster and Joe Penhall's *Love and Understanding*

In this play, directed by Mike Bradwell, and presented by the Long Wharf Theatre, Joe Penhall depicts the rush of modern life, the chaos of modern workplace and also the problems of modern people through his three characters Neal, Rachel and Richie. Neal and Rachel are stressful young doctors who work long hours in hospital. As well as depicting work field that even makes modern people mechanistic and robotlike, the relationship between Neal and Rachel also mirrors the miscommunication and toughness of healthy relationship between this couple because of their long work hours. And Richie, the old friend of Neal, suddenly appears in their flat wishing to stay with them for a while. The critic Zach Freeman reviews this play saying that it depicts "the challenges of two over-worked doctors, not married but living together, who scramble to survive the reappearance into their lives of a narcissistic, sociopathic friend" (2014). The troublemaker, selfish and lonely character Richie really turns their life upside down.

Neal reveals the bad timing of Richie's coming because both Neal and Rachel are very busy. His intense work tempo is expressed from Neal's mouth: "I've got too much responsibility. I'm in charge of intensive care and I shouldn't be. I'm working every day and every night. I never see Rachel because she's working every day and every night. We haven't talked properly in three weeks. We communicate by post-it notes. Answerphone messages, for God's sake" (Penhall, 1999, p. 13). The busy working hours of this couple take their time and stop them from sparing time for their relation and their individual needs. By creating a miscommunication between this couple, this busy schedule eliminates the closeness between them. In fact, this is very common complication of modern people who are driven between working long hours to live on and having little time for personal goals and wishes. Furthermore, the situation gets worse when someone troublemaker and chaos-fed appear in people's life. In the play, Richie gets involved in this couple's life adding more confusion and mistrustfulness to their busy business life. He acts like a catalyser for separation of this couple. "Richie's casually destructive hedonism" (Wolf, 1997) really affects their life and leads to question their decisions. Because, trusting the friendship of Richie, Neal mentions about the miscommunications and misunderstandings between him and Rachel because of their distance relationship in that busy work schedule. Richie easily uses this communication gap to manipulate Neal and Rachel, and to seduce Rachel. The reckless behaviours of Richie force this couple to reconsider their life, their job, and their relationship.

Observing the shattering relationship between his friend Neal and his girlfriend Rachel, he benefits from this existing chaos creating another chaos. Firstly, ignoring their friendship, he tries to seduce Neal's girlfriend Rachel, he manipulates their words and plays tricks to them to break their relationship. In their conversation between Rachel and Richie, we can see that he can easily manipulate Rachel against Neal. By being deceitful, Richie tries to show the lack side of Neal to make Rachel realize his bad side:

Rachel: Neal isn't boring.

Richie: He is. He's always been boring.

Rachel: He isn't boring. He's just Quieter than you.

Richie: A little shy and retiring. Absolutely.

Rachel: Unpretentious.

Richie: Unpretentious and a little unadventurous sometimes...

Rachel: Perceptive

Richie: Well absolutely. He thinks about things...

Rachel: He does. He thoughtful...

Richie: Earnest even. Humourless. And a little narrow-minded on occasions but only because he's so principled ...

Rachel: He's just not like you. (Penhall, 1999, p. 19).

Richie in the play clearly observes no rules and values, he follows his own desire and wishes ignoring other's feelings and values. Defining the qualities of trickster, which seems to fit very well some motives of Richie, the anthropologist and linguist Paul Radin says, "He knows neither good nor evil, yet he is responsible for both. He possesses no values, moral or social, is at the mercy of his passions and appetites, yet through his actions all values come into being" (1972, p. XXIII). Radin underlines certain challenging and also complementary characteristics attributed to trickster; as it can be seen s/he situates on the intersection of order and chaos, laughter and tear, power and vulnerability.

Even about the hospital issues, Richie shows his nature as deceitful and law breaking. He does not care any ethics and moral rules, he follows his own rules to cope with the issues. A heart bypass patient on a ventilator dies because of power failure and the only person who knows to switch the generator on is ill. Neal is the responsible doctor from the emergency procedure and now he is in trouble. Richie responds to the incident and makes a statement to the media explaining that this is only a coincidence, hospital has not been affected from this power failure. He declares that "the few patients on ventilators none came to any harm (...) on patient recovering from a life-threatening illness passed away during the night. (...) It's a coincidence" (Penhall, 1999, p. 24). Even though Neal says that it is unethical to say that kind of lie, Richie reminds him what he has had and what he may lose if the truth will be revealed. He manipulates the truth and uses it for his own benefits. The feeling of remorse Neal felt due to the death of some patients because of power failure is multiplied by Richie's distorted explanation to media. Neal feels angry with Richie, but Rachel thinks he is very practical and playful. This dialogue between the couple reflects the situation as follows:

Neal: He is a clown. A misfit.

Rachel: He's just a bit lost, that's all.

Neal: Dou you know why he spends his life travelling around the world? Because nobody can bear him at home.

Rachel: He did you a favour.

Neal: He lied.

Rachel: He was being economical with the truth.

Neal: One of my patients died (p. 26).

Neal emphasizes that Richie is an overtly deceitful character or directly trickster, while Rachel positions him as a more grounded character. Encountering and witnessing such like cunning and deceitful behaviours of Richie, Neal tries to avoid from misdirection of Richie. He even wants to protect Rachel and warns his girlfriend against Richie's persuasiveness with word plays and his unsteady temperaments. Here is his serious warning to Rachel:

Neal: But don't let him manipulate you.

Rachel: What do you mean?

Neal: You know how he's like.

Richie: Oh, he is just a bit of a chancer. [...] (p. 17).

This depiction of Richie as manipulator and chancer by Neal is justified after Richie's declaration of love. Neal's worries and fears are not ungrounded, and Richie shows his self-seeking and nonethical nature in his love confession. Ignoring his close friendship with Neal, he makes use of the power of his words; tries to bewitch Rachel with these words; "When I'm with you, I'm watching fireworks. When I'm with you I am a firework. Electricity pulses through my veins. Moonbeams dazzle my eyes and I'm blinded. Delighted. Enchanted... When I'm not with you I walk about lost, staring, talking to myself, my shirt is on back to front, my fly's undone, my trousers falling down, hollow, completely hollow" (p. 37). Even he offers Rachel to live together by surprising her, "Come and live with me in Wales" (p. 38). And expectedly Rachel rejects him reminding her relationship with Neal. However, near the end of the play, we will see that Richie achieves his goal, Rachel is seduced by Richie and Neal learns about their affair. Richie confesses that this affair is because of simple physical attraction and nothing serious. Feeling confused, Rachel wants to understand Richie's intention in this conversation:

Rachel: Why are you doing this? What is wrong with you? Why are you like this? (Pause.)

Richie: I'm lonely. (Richie dresses.)

Rachel: You're very strange person, Richie.

Richie: I know. (Silence. Rachel sits on the bed) (p. 17).

The preferences of Richie to sustain his life indeed do not completely overlap the traditional trickster's features; however, the features are leaded modern direction. For instance, in the definition of Professor Orrin Edgar Klapp, known for his work *Heroes, Villains, and Fools: Reflections of the American Character* (1972), trickster is described as a hero even if other uncelebrated qualification: "This type is a hero who in many respects verges upon being a villain, but still retains the admiration of the people. He is upstart, rebel, lawbreaker, liar, thief, and malefactor; and yet despite being so—perhaps because of this—he is a social force" (1954, p. 21). Here the motif, trickster as cultural hero, is emphasised alongside her/his rebellious, cunning, and villainous characteristics. However, in Penhall's Richie, his heroic side is nearly impossible to see, even he is saving Neal from the investigation in the hospital, indeed he leaves him with a bad conscious against the dead patients. As in the traditional trickster concept, Richie does not bring new ideas for the benefits of all human beings (Hyde, 1999, p. 8), but he can be interpreted as modern trickster who tries to survive and help survival of his surroundings in his microcosm. Richie gives cause for Neal to discover his life again by sabotaging his present life:

Neal: Richie and I were good friends once. I learned a lot from him.

Rachel: What did you learn?

Neal: I learnt what it's like to want to kill somebody (Penhall, 1999, p. 62).

Rather than bringing new ideas and hopes for other people's life, Richie prefers following the individual adventures even ignoring other's life. In the motives of Richie, the traditional roles of trickster for society's sake can hardly be seen since the major attention of Richie is on his own aims, desires and struggles.

The changing world in modern time has generated its own rules and dynamics relatedly it has produced idiosyncratic world view shaped around modernist approaches. In her work, *Modernist Literature: An Introduction* (2007), Professor Mary Ann Gilles and Aurelea Mahood stress the unconventional aspect of modernism by stressing that, "modernism is synonymous with a rejection of the past and an embrace of aesthetic innovation. It is synonymous with the diverse movements in art, architecture, and literature characterized by deliberate breaks with classical and traditional forms or methods of expression" (p. 2). As in the remarks of Professor Gilles, modernism feeds upon the positive/negative incidents and developments in its own time, modern art and literature search their ingredients in modern issues. Revolutionary improvements and novelties in science, technology, philosophy, psychology, and literature change the position and mindset of modern people. Modern people put themselves in the center of the world and appreciate personal dignity and individual existence. However, there is another face of modern period that is blood-soaked by two World Wars alongside some other dreadful incidents like economic crisis. These negative incidents create such a chaotic atmosphere for modern people that they find themselves in a quest for meaning, hope and humanity. This disorderly life generates alienated individuals, fragmented identities, and desperate souls. In this modern play by Penhall, the character Richie who appears in many disguises in the play as wanderer, cheater, seducer, manipulator, vulnerable, suicidal, lawbreaker or orator is important to see the changing nature of human in modern world. While trickster plays important role in traditional narratives as equalizer, recreator or advisor, modern trickster mostly concerns her/his personal life and avoid from guidance of people since modern world challenges the concept of reality and certain definitions with the celebration of subjective experiences and relative thinking (Morgan, 2013, p. 99).

The modern time that is identified with lack of meaning, alienation, aimlessness, stress, despair, and hopelessness more than any other time period, as Swiss psychologist and psychiatrist Carl Jung touches, modern man finds himself in a catastrophic and uncertain world and feeling sceptical hopeless and "modern man has suffered an almost fatal shock, psychologically speaking, and a result has fallen into profound uncertainty" (1933, p. 200). These modern issues are unsurprisingly witnessed in Richie's behaviours; his loneliness, his placelessness/homelessness, the fragmentation in his feeling, his introversion, his depressive and suicidal mood really depict the hopelessness and vulnerability of modern people. Richie has knocked himself out with ketamine that is used for serious general anaesthetic, he probably stole them from Neal's doctor's bag or supply fridge. Relatively Richie's some self-motivated behaviours, his stressed and manipulative motives may result from his confusion about life. Trickster embodies oppositions in his/her existence, as Jung claims, "he is both subhuman and superhuman, a bestial and divine being, whose chief and most alarming characteristic is his unconsciousness. Because of it he is deserted by his (evidently human) companions, which seems to indicate that he has fallen below their level of consciousness. He is so unconscious of himself that his body is not a unity, and his two hands fight each other" (1972, p. 203). Richie, in this play, is not adorned with superhuman or divine characteristics but his unconsciousness and disunity are easily noticeable. On the one hand, he is in a struggle with other characters wishing for his own goodness; one the other hand, he conflicts with himself; his use of drug and his attempt of suicide show his uneasy mind.

In the act two scene four, we see Richie in hospital lying unconscious, he is about to die. his thoughtless and dangerous habits, his excessive alcohol consumption or sedative use, bring him on the break of death. Richie does not only unsettle other people's lives; he is also suffering from the confusion in his own life. For

instances, in the previous scene, Richie appears in a bar, drinking and telling stories to everyone about his ancestors. He reveals some bad memories about them as in the story of grandfather who beats his sons harshly to make them ready to army. It is clear that these unpleasant stories reveal the wounded and vulnerable side of him, apparently, he is still recalling the negative effects of this past life experiences. Richie, himself, diagnoses his own problem with these words, "My problem is that I know too much. I'm too intelligent for this world. And what's more it's my considered and exquisitely elegant analysis that I'm too fucking sensitive... (*To the bar in general*) You're all a bunch of shits..." (p. 52). In one sense, his self-analysis shows his place in modern life. The felling of isolation, loneliness and vulnerability confuses the issues in Richie's life. He believes that he is intelligent, however he is unable to use his knowledge for his happiness. He is homeless, abandoned and in search of love and order in his life. This hospital scene has another importance for Richie other than regaining his health; he undergoes an evolution process after feeling a kind of awakening. Richie describes his feelings in this dialogue between him and Neal:

Richie: I've changed. I feel almost absurdly positive about everything now. It's quite incredible. (*Pause.*) While I was in a hospital, I had an epiphany..."

Neal: An epiphany?

Richie: It was like I went outside of my body.

(...)

I floated from my body and I looked down and I saw myself lying there and I saw people gathered around, being very concerned and I felt very strange. I felt like I wanted to cry. I mean, it wasn't the fact that I was in hospital. It was the fact that other people were concerned about me. It was... the concern that got to me. (*Pause*) (p. 57).

This evolution of Richie is meaningful since he begins to feel worthy and precious. The lonely and fragmented individual is relieved with the concerns and sympathy of other people in hospital. Richie gets inspiration for a better settled life. Neal asks Richie about his plan and Richie reveals that he will go to Wales and wants to stand on his feet. Richie's these words remind us the definition of Jung on the trickster cycle depicting her/his development during time and we can witness the amelioration in Richie's future plans even though we cannot be sure whether these plans are lie or his real goals for life:

The Trickster cycle corresponds to the earliest and least developed period of life. Trickster is a figure whose physical appetites dominate his behaviour; he has the mentality of an infant. [...] At the end of his rogue's progress he is beginning to take on the physical likeness of a grown man (1968, p. 112).

As Jung says in the decision of Richie, it is possible to see a passage from immaturity to maturity, now he is ready to take responsibility and acts for his life. After listening all his talks, Neal is still doubtful against Richie, because he feels sick of his lies, Neal wants to company him near to train to see his departure, because Neal really expects a Richieless life for some time. At the same time Neal feels worried about him even if he is very sick of his lies, his irresponsible behaviours, and his unsteady mood. He wants to know what he will do in Wales and how he makes his life there.

Neal: Have you bought your ticket yet?

Richie: Not yet.

Neal: Do you know how much a ticket to Wales is?

Richie: No ides.

Neal: Have you got any money?

Richie: A little...

Neal: Have you got anywhere to stay?

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Richie: thought I'd just busk it.

Neal: Do you know anybody in Wales?

Richie: You know I don't.

Neal: Not a soul? Ah. (*Neal takes out his wallet, offers money.*)

Richie: I couldn't. It's time I stood on my two feet again (Penhall, 1999, p. 59).

As it can be seen Richie start a journey for his life choosing a new path to himself. He will leave for Wales and learn to make his living. Even though he is planning to leave, he has other plans that will be distressful for Neal. Richie plans to come back in a year or two because Neal is "a real friend" (p. 59) to him and he knows and expects that Neal will be stay by his side at all events. The play finalizes with Richie's departure and an attempt of Neal and Rachel to settle their relationship. Even so, in the sense of Richie, the playwright leaves his potential future to the audiences' interpretation; he may choose to recreate his life caring about other people's rights and happiness or he may continue to concern about his own benefits and keep on his life by sabotaging other's life. He is mischievous, unpredictable, and nonstable character who can surprise his audience in an unexpected way. The final of the play does not bring conclusion about life and decision of Richie; on the contrary, the audience wonders about his next adventures.

Conclusion

Trickster as a character or as a symbolic figure has taken its place in various literary, mythological and cultural narratives. It has appeared with different names and multiple disguises. Sometimes s/he shows up like a wise old wo/man and directs people for goodness, sometimes s/he makes up lies and stories when s/he is stuck in a difficult situation or sometimes turns into a hedonist who look out for herself/himself. The British psychotherapist and writer Andrew Samuels in his book *The Political Psyche* (1993) touches trickster's paradoxical nature and intention, he says, "The Trickster is compatible with order and organization on the one hand, and with chaos and fluidity on the other. Trickster's order is created through chaos" (p. 69). Trickster's order built in disorder even manifests itself in some adjectives that are often attributed to trickster such as troublemaker, rebellious, creator or lawbreaker. While analysing Joe Penhall's play *Love and Understanding*, the character Richie embodies certain features of trickster blending them together with the modern attitude. In this character, it is possible to find some traces of trickster in his mischievous, cunning, hedonist, chaos producer, wiser and ignorant behaviours, furthermore, his introversion, placelessness, loneliness and his hollow soul signalize his modern side. Modern period that is characterised by its peculiar features and developments in any field apparently affects the narratives of trickster and characteristics of trickster. Richie, in this play, is not adorned with superhuman or divine characteristics but he appears with his wit, unconsciousness and disunity at the same time. In this modern play by Penhall, the character Richie who appears in many disguises in the play as wanderer, cheater, seducer, manipulator, vulnerable, suicidal, lawbreaker or orator is important to see the changing nature of human in modern world. He is in a struggle with other characters wishing for his own goodness, he lies, he cheats for his benefits; on the other hand, he conflicts with himself, he uses drugs and he attempts suicide. Richie shows himself with multiple characteristics, with his decadent slyness, hedonism, shallowness, and piteous loneliness, etc., that are shaped and evolved in parallel with modern developments, so he can be thought of as a powerful representative of trickster in the modern time.

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