



Article Info/Makale Bilgisi

Received/Geliş: 30.12.2016 ✓ Accepted/Kabul: 28.03.2017

DOI: 10.5505/pausbed.2017.83798

MATERIALIZING THE READING PROCESS: JASPER FFORDE'S *THE EYRE AFFAIR**

F. ZEYNEP BİLGE**

Abstract

This study suggests that Jasper Fforde's novel *The Eyre Affair* (2001) is a fictional representation of the reader response theory. Being the first novel of the Thursday Next series, the novel introduces the reader an alternate universe in which there are no boundaries between the real and the fictitious worlds. Allowing the reader enter Jane Eyre's story both on a mental and physical level, Fforde's rewriting fills in the gaps within the source text with alternative incidents. Basing its argument on Louise M. Rosenblatt's theory concerning the transactional reader response theory, this study displays the reader's dynamic role during the reading process by emphasizing the intertextual relationship between Jane Eyre and *The Eyre Affair*.

Keywords: *The Eyre Affair, Jane Eyre, Jasper Fforde, Reader Response Theory, Rewriting, Intertextuality, Parody*

OKUMA SÜRECİNİ CİSİMLEŞTİRMEK: JASPER FFORDE'NİN *THE EYRE AFFAIR* ROMANI

Özet

Bu çalışma Jasper Fforde'nin *The Eyre Affair* (2001) adlı romanının okur tepkisi odaklı eleştiri kuramının kurmaca bir temsili olduğu iddiasını ortaya atmaktadır. Thursday Next roman dizisinin ilk romanı olan bu metin, okura gerçek ve kurmaca arasında sınır bulunmayan bir evren sunar. Okurun Jane Eyre'in dünyasına hem zihinsel hem fiziksel olarak girmesine olanak sağlayarak Fforde tarafından kaleme alınan bu yeniden yazım, kaynak metindeki boşlukları alternatif olaylarla doldurmaktadır. Louise M. Rosenblatt'ın okur tepkisi odaklı eleştiri kuramını temel alan bu çalışma, Jane Eyre ve *The Eyre Affair* romanları arasındaki metinlerarası ilişkiyi vurgulayarak okurun okuma sürecindeki dinamik rolünü gözler önüne sermektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *The Eyre Affair, Jane Eyre, Jasper Fforde, Okur Tepkisi Teorisi, Yeniden Yazım, Metinlerarasılık, Parodi*

* This article is the extended version of the paper that was presented at the 10th International IDEA Conference: Studies in English (Boğaziçi University, Istanbul, 14-16 April 2016).

** Asst. Prof. Mimar Sinan Fine Arts University, Western Languages and Literatures, Istanbul.
e-mail:zeynep.bilge@msgsu.edu.tr

The Eyre Affair (2001) is the first novel of the Thursday Next series, named after the heroine of the novels, who is a literary detective¹. This humorous series can aptly be defined as a combination of detective fiction, fantasy, science fiction, thriller, and even romance. In this particular novel, through which the heroine Thursday Next alongside her idiosyncratic universe is first introduced to the reader, the author Jasper Fforde not only presents a rewriting of *Jane Eyre* but displays a parody of the concept of intertextuality and reader response theory as well. Fforde's text provides the reader (both fictitious and real) with an opportunity to materialize the transaction between the text and the reader. In accordance with Louise M. Rosenblatt's theory arguing that "a novel or poem or play remains merely inkspots on paper until a reader transforms them into a set of meaningful symbols" (Rosenblatt, 1995: 24), the reading process in *The Eyre Affair* is utterly dynamic, resulting the reader enter the literary work physically. In Fforde's work, the reading process becomes a part of the storyline and it is materialized when readers find themselves in the literary works they read.

The Eyre Affair presents a universe where travel between the real world and books is possible through various methods and these realms are intermingled when the evil character Hades steals the original manuscript of Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, sends one of his men, Hobbes, to Thornfield Hall through the prose portal (which is invented by Thursday's uncle Mycroft as a door between the real world and books) and kidnaps Jane. Since *Jane Eyre* is a first-person narrative and the narrator is no longer in the novel, the text ends where she is abducted: right after Bertha Mason sets Rochester's bedroom on fire in Chapter 15. From that moment on *The Eyre Affair* becomes a detective story in which the literary detective Thursday Next pursues the criminal mastermind, and inevitably rewrites Jane's story. Similar to Thursday's mental and physical transaction with *Jane Eyre*, each and every reader of *The Eyre Affair* inevitably "brings to the text a reservoir of past experiences with language and the world" (Rosenblatt, 2005: 91).

Presenting their storyline through a complex network of texts, the novels in the Thursday Next series "use the idea of gaps not only to describe the reading practices of characters within the books, but also as part of a meta-textual framing of the series" (Taylor, 2010: 28). As stated in the fourth novel of the series entitled *Something Rotten* (which primarily focuses on *Hamlet*, as the title suggests): "Each interpretation of an event, setting or character is unique to each of those who read it because they clothe the author's description with the memory of their own experiences. Every character they read is actually a complex amalgam of people that they've met, read or seen before ... Because every reader's experiences are so different, each book is unique for each reader" (Fforde, 2004: 21). Similarly, Rosenblatt who defines the relationship between the reader and any given text as a transaction, argues that "each individual, whether speaker, listener, writer, or reader, brings to the transaction a personal linguistic-experiential reservoir, the residue of past transaction in life and language" (Rosenblatt, 1993: 381). The readers' involvement in the text becomes so intense that throughout the Thursday Next series "reading involves actually entering books, either metaphorically or literally, texts become subject to new forces and vulnerable to appropriations" (Taylor, 2010: 27). Thus, throughout this novel – as well as the rest of

¹ The literary detectives, or "LiteraTecs" are professional detectives, who deal with all kinds of literary crimes (from plagiarism to gang wars on literary subjects). In this parallel universe, literature is such a significant part of the daily life that even a debate on Shakespearean authorship can result in gang wars.

the Thursday Next series – concepts such as intertextuality, rewriting and reader response theory become a part of the storyline.

It is possible to read the jumps into Brontë's novel² as a parody of the reader response theory, which argues that reading is a dynamic act performed by the reader and it would not be farfetched to suggest that it is a form of rewriting taking place in the reader's mind. Rosenblatt displays the reader's involvement in the creation process of the text as follows:

In the transactional theory, "text" refers to a set of verbal signs. The poem, the novel, the play, the story, i.e., the literary work of art, comes into being, happens, during the aesthetic transaction. This lived-through current of ideas sensations, images, tensions, becomes shaped into what the reader sees as the literary work or the evocation corresponding to the text. This is what the reader starts reacting or responding to *during* the reading event. Later, there will be recall of the experience, remembering of, and reflection on, the evocation and the reactions" (Rosenblatt, 1985: 103)

According to the transactional reader response theory, the literary work is completed (in other words, the gaps within the text are filled in) by the reader's imagination, which is formed in accordance with the reader's personal experiences and background. In *The Eyre Affair*, which can be regarded as a fictive manifestation of the reader's involvement in creating the meaning of a literary work, the contribution of the reader to the realization of the text is no longer on a mental level – it is, however, utterly physical. Furthermore, Barthes' "The Death of the Author" arguing that "*the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author*" (Barthes, 1977: 148) is also substantiated and taken a step further in Fforde's novel. Thursday replaces Charlotte Brontë, while changing the course of events. Brontë's authorship is challenged when it is claimed that the "original ending" is rewritten as a result of Thursday Next's intrusion with the storyline: According to Fforde's fictional version, Brontë's novel ends with Jane accompanying St John Rivers to India, and "*the alternative version of Jane Eyre turns out to be the original and our original is depicted as an alternative version*" (Berninger and Thomas, 2007: 188). In Fforde's narrative Brontë is almost utterly invisible, and her fictional characters are hinted to be autonomous³. In other words, *Jane Eyre* seems to write itself as a result of the intrusions coming from the Outland. Thursday's involvement in the narrative – which she calls a "slight" change in the end (Fforde, 2003a: 349) – is reminiscent of the never-ending debates on the authorship of the Shakespearean canon as depicted in the previous chapters of *The Eyre Affair*. Both instances can be interpreted in light of Linda Hutcheon's argument on the politics of parody suggesting that it "*contests our humanist assumptions about artistic originality and uniqueness and our capitalist notions of ownership and property*" (89). Likewise, as Taylor indicates, "*Fforde's novels provide a model for popular appropriations of literary*

² These "jumps" or visits are further explored in detail in the following pages of this study.

³ In the third book of the series, *The Well of Lost Books* (2003), Count Dracula wins the Best Dead Person in Fiction Award at the 932rd Annual BookWorld Awards. His speech at the ceremony demonstrates the autonomy of the characters in Fforde's alternate universe: "*'First,' said the Count in a soft voice with a slight lisp, 'my thanks go to Bram for his admirable reporting of my activities. I would also like to thank Lucy, Mr. Harker and Van Helsing - '"* (Fforde, 2003b: 344). Portraying Bram Stoker as an agent or a reporter rather than a creator essentially deprives him of his authority over the text, which is reminiscent of Brontë's absence in *The Eyre Affair*.

texts, and while it may comfort us, as it does Thursday, to think that authors like Shakespeare are in control of their texts, Fforde's novels demonstrate that such control is an illusion perpetuated to deny readers the dangerous but liberating power of appropriation" (38). Hence, the novels in this series challenge the authority of the author and emphasize the power the reader possesses during the reading process.

As Berninger and Thomas argue, *The Eyre Affair* is neither a sequel nor a prequel; it is a parallelquel (187), which refers to "fiction within a storyline running parallel to a canonical novel" (Kirchknopf, 2011: 363). The novel takes place in an alternative Britain in 1985: it is the 131st year of the Crimean War between England and the Imperial Russian Government; there is no monarchy in England; Wales is a separate and socialist country known as the People's Republic of Wales; "animal cloning is a hobby, dodos abound, ... time travel is possible, and werewolves and vampires are actual criminal problems" (Hateley, 2005: 1024). Arts in general, but specifically literature, seem to dominate the social and daily life in this alternate Britain to such an extent that most of the crimes are related to arts, literature and particularly Shakespeare. Literature, as well as men and women of letters, become a tangible part of the real world in this parallel universe.⁴ In return, the real men and women of letters are fictionalised such as Wordsworth: Polly, Thursday's aunt, becomes the first person using her husband's prose portal and enters Wordsworth's poem "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud." There she meets the poet in person, who is aware of the fact that he is metaphorically alive in his works: "Everything that I once was is now here; my life is contained in my works. A life in volumes of words; it is poetic" (Fforde, 2003a: 127).

This interwoven relationship between reality and fiction presents a universe where the boundary between daily life in the real world and literature is utterly blurred. Moreover, the names of these two worlds "Outland" and "BookWorld" emphasize the standpoint of Jasper Fforde: the centre of attention is the BookWorld, whereas the real world is simply a foreign country – the Outland. In this parallel universe, where time travel is considered to be natural, travels between the real world and books are entirely normal as well. The Japanese tourist guide Mrs. Nakijima is a significant indicator of the fact that "the crossing of the border between the world of the self and the textual world of the other is an everyday occurrence" (Horstkotte, 2003: 330) since she makes a jump once a year with a visitor. When she meets Thursday in Millcote, Mrs. Nakijima reveals that she "think[s] hard, speak[s] the lines" (Fforde, 2003a: 326) and finds herself in *Jane Eyre*. What Mrs. Nakijima does in order to find herself physically in Millcote is a manifestation of a highly attentive, focused reading process. Mrs. Nakijima's mental involvement with Jane's story during the reading process allows her to become a concrete part of Jane's environment. That is, instead of seeing herself in Millcote in her mind's eye, she visits the fictional Millcote in reality. Significantly enough, the travels between these two worlds are not necessarily one-way. It is understood that the travel other way around is also possible, when Christopher Sly appears in London in the twentieth-century. Similarly, "Rochester, the wanderer between the two worlds, is able to travel quite freely to the outside world, since he is not mentioned in long stretches of *Jane Eyre*" (Horstkotte, 2003: 330).

⁴ Although he does not appear in the novel as a character, Shakespeare as a literary figure plays a significant role in Thursday Next's world: there are Will-speak machines all around London – these are "officially known as ... Shakespeare Soliloquy Automaton" (ibid.: 81); *Richard III* has been playing for over fifteen years in a Swindon theatre in the manner of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* with audience involvement (Hateley, 2005: 1030); who really wrote the Shakespearean canon is an ongoing debate amongst the supporters of Marlowe, Bacon and De Vere in an utterly fierce manner (which sometimes trigger gang wars).

Rochester's freedom in wandering between the BookWorld and the Outland, as well as Thursday and Mrs. Nakijima's freedom in walking around Millcote freely, is only possible because Brontë's novel is a first-person narrative. The novel is limited with what Jane Eyre sees or knows.

Thursday pays a visit to *Jane Eyre* in person when she is a small child: Young Thursday finds herself in the scene, where Jane and Rochester first meet. In fact, Thursday causes the accident involving Rochester's horse, and according to *The Eyre Affair*, Rochester's exclamation of "*what the deuce is to do now?*" (Brontë, 1992: 98) addresses Thursday directly:

[Rochester] had not seen my small form and the safe route down the lane led right through where I was standing; opposite me was a treacherous slab of ice. Within a few moments the horse was upon me, the heavy hooves thumping the hard ground, the hot breath from its velvety nose blowing on my face. Suddenly, the rider, perceiving the small girl in his path for the first time, uttered: "What the deuce - " and reined his horse rapidly to the left, away from me but onto the slippery ice. The horse lost its footing and went crashing to the ground. I took a step back, mortified at the accident I had caused. (Fforde, 2003a: 68)

This extract substantiates that the hiatus within a literary work is filled in with the reader's imagination; in this particular scene Fforde's imagination completes the incident through the involvement of an invisible character. Fforde's rewriting suggests that since Jane cannot see the young Thursday during this accident, Thursday does not appear in Jane's first person narrative, and this proves Głowiński's argument that, "*in first-person narration the narrator's possession of information is as important as his lack of it*" (104). It is significant that Jane's authority - being the protagonist of this *bildungsroman* - over the storyline is challenged and questioned through such incidents. Similar to the real world, Fforde presents the reader a universe where the protagonist (and hence the reader of the first-person narrative) is limited by what he or she personally observes. By presenting certain alternative additional scenes and/or points of view to Brontë's first person narrative, Fforde (in the first-person narrative he composes) evidently displays the fact that the narrator is "*basically not omniscient*" (Fforde, 2003a: 105). This inevitably allows the reader question Thursday Next's authority over her first-person narration as well.

Thursday's involvement in *Jane Eyre* becomes professional when she grows up. Since life in this alternate universe seems to be substantially based upon literature, it is reasonable to have a separate division of Special Operations that focuses on literary crimes: Thursday Next is a member of the LiteraTecs, who "*investigate forgeries, thefts, misrepresentations, and interpretations of those literary texts deemed valuable by society*" (Hateley, 1029); the LiteraTecs office is quite similar to a "university English department" (ibid.) with specialists on specific periods, authors or genres. Everything gets thoroughly formidable and complicated at the LiteraTecs office when the representative of the ultimate evil, Hades, decides to kidnap Jane Eyre simply for the sake of evil, and ransom. As the name of the evil character evidently indicates, Fforde presents the reader a rewriting of the Hades - Persephone myth, which centres upon the abduction of Persephone. In this alternative reading of the classical myth, Hades

does not intend to make Jane his wife but his deeds akin to the mythological Hades, affect the lives of all others (not only the fictional characters in *Jane Eyre* but also the inhabitants of the Outland presented in *The Eyre Affair*) to a significant extent.

Hades, in accordance with his name's significance in mythology, is an invisible and almost all-knowing character, who is able to travel between the two worlds, similar to his mythological counterpart. When Mr. Tamworth from SO-5 briefs Thursday on Hades's involvement in the disappearance of the original manuscript of *Martin Chuzzlewit*, he points out two major rules concerning Hades: Rule number 1. Never speak his name "because he can hear his own name – even whispered – over a thousand-yard radius, perhaps more. He uses it to sense [his enemies'] presence" (Fforde, 2003a: 26); Rule Number 2. "believe nothing that he says or does. He can lie in thought, deed, action and appearance" (ibid.: 27). These rules emphasizing his sorcerer-like skills also reveal his authority over the course of the storyline in the novel as well as the lives of the individuals he encounters with. Regarding his ability to manipulate everyone around himself, Hades is portrayed as the ultimate shape-shifter and liar, which inevitably relates him to fiction and acting. His interference in the BookWorld results in crucial changes in certain literary texts: since he abducts and then murders Mr. Quaverley, such a Dickensian character is unknown to the reader (both the fictive reader in Fforde's novel and in the real world). Moreover, it may be suggested that the autopsy on Mr. Quaverley's body in the Outland is a literal manifestation or "literalizing of critical reading" (Hateley, 2005: 1031). Once again, the intellectual acts the reader employs while reading or analysing a literary text in his or her real world is materialized in Fforde's novel. Furthermore, it is possible to insinuate that as a result of his intervention, Hades becomes one of the co-authors of *Jane Eyre* alongside Brontë and Thursday.

While trying to save Jane, and hence her narrative, Thursday jumps into Brontë's novel, and her intrusion in the text causes significant changes in the plot as it is known to the reader of Brontë's text: For instance; finding Jane with St. John Rivers at Moor House, she imitates Rochester's voice and whispers "Jane" for three times outside the window. In this context, Thursday's interference presents an alternative reading and reason to the gothic incident, which involves Jane and Rochester's telepathic communication in Chapter 35 of Brontë's *hypotext*, in Gérard Genette's terminology. Moreover, it is Hades who burns down Thornfield Hall and kills Bertha Mason. Thus, Fforde uses the authority provided by his authorship in order to fill in, or rather rewrite, the gaps in Brontë's plot. Thursday and Hades' involvement – or rather, intrusion – is representative of the potential readings of any given text according to the reader response theory. In Fforde's text, the changes made in Brontë's novel after Thursday and Hades's intrusion is applauded by the common readers in the Outland but Thursday is severely criticized by the Brontë Federation.

The intertextual relationship between *Jane Eyre* and *The Eyre Affair* is also reflected in the depiction of the heroines of these two novels. Both texts are first person narratives, allowing the reader share the I/eye and perception of the main character, while witnessing how their experiences shape their personalities. Furthermore, both novels display a mirror scene in the first chapters where concepts such as self-realization and identity construction (notions in accordance with Lacan's mirror stage) are emphasized: Jane, who is locked up in the red room as a punishment turns "a fascinated eye towards the dimly gleaming mirror" (Brontë, 1992: 11) and

faints in a couple of minutes, while Thursday becomes distanced from herself to study her own image:

I opened the drawer of my desk and pulled out a small mirror. A woman with somewhat ordinary features stared back at me. Her hair was a plain mousy color and of medium length, tied up rather hastily in a ponytail at the back. She had no cheekbones to speak of and her face, I noticed, had just started to show some rather obvious lines. (Fforde, 2003a: 19)

What is interesting in Thursday's observation is that, while distancing herself from her own image using the personal pronoun "she," Thursday examines her identical, yet reversed reflection in the mirror. Similarly, she only manages to fully accept her true feelings for her ex-lover Landen Parke-Laine, when she stays in Thornfield Hall and observes Jane and Rochester's relationship closely. In other words, her experiences in the BookWorld and Thornfield Hall function as a kind of a mirror image for her relationship with Landen in the Outland. This is indicative of a mutual transaction involving readers who not only bring their experiences to the text but also introduce the effects of the reading process (and the text itself) to their real lives.

Furthermore, Thursday, similar to Jane, receives a proposal from her professional partner Bowen Cable and like Jane, she refuses to go abroad with a man for whom she does not have any romantic desires; like Jane's telepathic communication with Rochester in Moor House, Thursday has a gothic experience and is visited by her future self in a hospital room and decides to go back to her home town, where she is "*ultimately, ... reunited with her crippled lover [Landen Parke-Laine] after years of separation, and they are married*" like Jane and Rochester (Hateley, 2005: 1026). Last but not the least, Thursday becomes a subject of books: each chapter in *The Eyre Affair* begins with an epigraph and some of the quotations reveal that Millon de Floss is the author of the book entitled *Thursday Next – A Biography* (Fforde, 2003a: 44), and Thursday herself writes a book on her experiences as a LiteraTec called, *A Life in SpecOps* (ibid.: 63).

Following a pattern that is similar to Brontë's novel in the storyline, the *hypertext* (adaptation/rewriting) and the *hypotext* (source text) intertwine to such an extent that both narratives have the power to rewrite one another. Through the humorous tone employed in the novel, *The Eyre Affair* allows the reader to observe how imagination operates during the reading process on a literal level. As far as the argument hidden in-between the text is concerned, the narrative no longer belongs to Jesper Fforde or Thursday Next ... it is now the reader's turn to rewrite it.

WORKS CITED

- Barthes, R. (1977). **Image - Music – Text**, (Trns. S. Heath), Fontana Press, London.
- Berninger, M. and Thomas, K. (2007). "A Parallelquel of a Classic Text and Reification of the Fictional – the Playful Parody of *Jane Eyre* in Jasper Fforde's *The Eyre Affair*". **A Breath of Fresh Eyre: Intertextual and Intermedial Reworkings of *Jane Eyre***, (Ed: M. Rubik and E. Mettingen-Schartmann), Radopi, Amsterdam and New York.
- Brontë, C. (1992). **Jane Eyre**, Wordsworth Editions Limited, Hertfordshire.
- Fforde, J. (2004). **Something Rotten**, Penguin Books, London.
- Fforde, J. (2003a). **The Eyre Affair**, 2nd Edition, Penguin Books, London.
- Fforde, J. (2003b). **The Well of Lost Plots**, Viking Books, New York.
- Głowiński, M. (1977). "On the First-Person Novel", (Trns.: R. Stone), **New Literary History**, 9/1, 103-114.
- Hateley, E. (2005). "The End of *The Eyre Affair: Jane Eyre*, Parody, and Poplular Culture", **The Journal of Popular Culture**, 38/6, 1022-1036.
- Horstkotte, M. (2003). "The Worlds of the Fantastic Other in Postmodern English Fiction", **Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts**, 14/3, 318-332.
- Hutcheon, L. (2007). **The Politics of Postmodernism**, 2nd Edition, Routledge, London and New York.
- Kirchknopf, A. (2011). "The Future of the Post-Victorian Novel: A Speculation in Genre", **Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies (HJEAS)**, 17/2, 351-370.
- Rosenblatt, L. M. (1995). **Literature as Exploration**, 5th Edition, The Modern Language Association of America, New York.
- Rosenblatt, L. M. (2005). "Literature – S.O.S.!", **Making Meaning with Texts: Selected Essays**, Heinemann, Portsmouth, 89-95.
- Rosenblatt, L. M. (1993). "The Transactional Theory: Against Dualisms", **College English**, 55/4, 377-386.
- Rosenblatt, L. M. (1985). "Viewpoints: Transaction versus Interaction: A Terminological Rescue Operation", **Research in the Teaching of English**, 19/1, 96-107.
- Taylor, P.R. (2010). "Criminal Appropriations of Shakespeare in Jasper Fforde's 'Something Rotten'", **College Literature**, 37/4, 23-41.