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# TAMING THE MONSTER WITHIN US: AN EMPATHETIC READING OF STEPHEN CRANE'S "THE MONSTER"[1]

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## Abstract

Being a relatively new research interest, narrative empathy explores the role that narratives play in cultivating and stimulating empathy in readers. Coming into the picture upon the discussions on ethics and ethical criticism, narrative empathy is of capital importance in both expanding the scope of previous studies conducted regarding the relationship between ethics and literature, and in making a valuable contribution to these studies by centering upon a universal feeling that is evocative of our humanness, namely empathy. As suggested by the narrative empathy theory, to be able to empathize with others who are in pain or live under hard circumstances, it is not a necessity to witness their sufferings at firsthand. Even by reading about these fictional or non- fictional characters, readers can feel an empathy with them thanks to the authorial choice. However, some scholars like Richard Posner, who is regarded as an influential figure not only specializing in the fields of law and economics but also penning works related to moral philosophy and ethical criticism, are of the opinion that ethics and aesthetics are two opposite poles and that's why argue against the potential of literature to lead readers to develop empathy. By exploring and analyzing the certain narrative devices and techniques employed by Stephen Crane in his acclaimed novella "The Monster", this paper aims to demonstrate the inextricable connection between ethics and aesthetics, and how these strategic choices of Crane contribute to the cultivation of empathy in readers.

**Key Words:** Narrative Empathy, Stephen Crane, The Monster, Ethics and Aesthetics

[1] This review article is written under the supervision of Professor Mine Ozyurt Kilic within the framework of discussions on "narrative empathy" in the MA course Narrative Theory.

# İÇİMİZDEKİ CANAVARI EHLİLEŞTİRMEK: STEPHEN CRANE'NİN "CANAVAR" ADLI KISA ROMANININ EMPATİK BİR İNCELEMESİ


## Öz

Oldukça yeni bir araştırma alanı olan anlatımsal empati, anlatıların okuyucularda empati duygusunu teşvik etme ve geliştirmede oynadığı rolü incelemektedir. Etik ve etik eleştiri tartışmalarıyla gündeme gelen anlatımsal empati, hem etik-edebiyat arasındaki ilişkiye dair daha önce yapılmış olan çalışmaların kapsamını genişletmek hem de evrensel bir duygu olarak karşımıza çıkan ve bize insanlığımızı hatırlatan empatiyi merkeze alarak bu çalışmalara değerli bir katkı sağlamak açısından büyük önem taşımaktadır. Anlatımsal empati teorisinin ileri sürdüğü gibi, acı içinde olan veya zor şartlar altında yaşayan kişilerle empati kurabilmek için onların acılarına ilk elden tanık olmak gibi bir zorunluluk bulunmamaktadır. Kurgusal veya kurgusal olmayan bu karakterler hakkında okuyarak bile, yazar tarafından yapılmış olan tematik ve formal seçimler sayesinde okuyucular bu karakterlerle empati kurabilirler. Ancak, sadece hukuk ve ekonomi alanlarında uzmanlaşmakla kalmayıp aynı zamanda ahlak felsefesi ve etik eleştiri ile ilgili eserler kaleme almış olan ve etkili bir şahsiyet olarak kabul edilen Richard Posner gibi bazı bilim insanları, etik ve estetiğin iki zıt kutup olduğu görüşündedirler, ve bu yüzden de edebiyatın okuyucuları empati kurmaya sevk etme potansiyeline karşı çıkmaktadırlar. Bu makale, Stephen Crane'nin ünlü kısa romanı "Canavar"da kullandığı belirli anlatı araçlarını ve tekniklerini inceleyip analiz ederek, etik ve estetik arasındaki ayrılmaz bağlantıyı ve Crane'nin bu stratejik tercihlerinin okuyucularda empati gelişimine nasıl katkıda bulunduğunu ortaya koymayı amaçlamaktadır.


**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Anlatımsal Empati, Stephen Crane, Canavar, Etik ve Estetik

## INTRODUCTION

Having appeared in the twentieth century as a translation of Einfühlung, empathy is defined by Suzanne Keen in her "A Theory of Narrative Empathy" as a "vicarious, spontaneous sharing of affect, which can be provoked by witnessing another's emotional state, by hearing about another's condition, or even by reading" (Keen, 2006: 208). The potential relationship between reading fiction and the cultivation of empathy has been a recent phenomenon drawing the attention of scores of people ranging from neuropsychologists to literary scholars and philosophers including Suzanne Keen, Martha Nussbaum, Wayne Booth, and Richard Posner. The question whether being exposed to literature has a formative and positive effect on readers and their empathy levels is answered in multiple ways. While Booth accentuates that "we are at least partially constructed, in our most fundamental moral character, by the stories we have heard, or read, or viewed, or acted out in amateur theatricals" (Booth, 1998: 19) and explores the unquestionable power of narratives in shaping our lives, Nussbaum highlights the public role of literature in inducing empathy and affecting readers' moral development and helping form a democratic society in her "Exactly and Responsibly". As reflected by Anna Lindhé in "The Paradox of Narrative Empathy and the Form of the Novel, or What George Eliot Knew" the psychologists Kidd and Castano supports the view that "reading (good) fiction improves empathy" (Lindhé, 2016: 20). However, scholars like Richard Posner defining themselves as aestheticists challenge the narratives' role in triggering empathy in readers by arguing that looking at a work from an ethical perspective is to ignore its aesthetic qualities. According to him, "Nothing in the nature either of literature in general or of any of its genres in particular, including the realistic novel, tends to produce models of modern moral behavior" (Posner, 1998:5). Deeming the ethics and aesthetics as two distinct notions, Posner goes against narrative empathy that has found itself a great place among psychologists, scholars, and readers. Unlike what Posner argues, this paper aims to prove the

inextricability of ethics and aesthetics by exploring the ways Stephen Crane's "The Monster" cultivates empathy through narrative devices and techniques and contributes to empathetic experience by opening readers' mind to the sufferings of others.

## 1. THE ANALYSIS OF THE NARRATIVE ELEMENTS THAT STIMULATE EMPATHY IN CRANE'S NOVELLA "THE MONSTER"

Published in 1898, Crane's "The Monster" takes place in a fictional village named Whilomville where a wildfire breaks out causing Henry Johnson, who is a negro stable boy hired by Dr. Trescott, lose his face while he tries to save the doctor's son Jimmie. Thematically, the novella employs an ethical questioning and dilemma stemming from the portrayal of a faceless man, his complex relationship with the townspeople, and how he is treated by them. However, what turns this novella into a guide fostering empathy is not only its thematic choices, but also formal qualities deliberately employed by Crane. As also pointed out by Keen: "The generic and formal choices made by authors in crafting fictional worlds play a role in inviting (or retarding) readers' empathic responses" (Keen, 2006: 215).

The title of the novella appears as one of the foremost formal choices reinforcing the level of empathy in readers. Under normal conditions, readers who come across the title "The Monster" will automatically imagine a figure which is formidable, disgusting, and rampageous. However, what is named in the novella as the monster is Henry Johnson who is recognized as courteous and naïve by the townspeople. Henry is a monster created by society. In this regard, he appears as the victim of Whilomville community. Consequently, by employing the title in an ironic way, Stephen Crane gives his readers a shock leading them to be alert and contemplate on who the real monster is; Henry or society. By opening readers' minds, Crane encourages an emotional identification with Henry resulting in a reciprocity between self and other.

Told by an extra-diegetic narrator, meaning a narrator who himself/herself is not present in the diegesis as a character, in Gerard Genette's terms, Stephen Crane's "The Monster" puts its readers into the decision-making mechanism by assigning them a responsibility to understand what is going on and contemplate to come to a conclusion by benefiting from moral and ethical values. While being exposed to the diegesis, which is a frequently employed term in narrative theory studies connoting "the storyworld evoked by the narrative text and inhabited by the characters" (Herman, 2007: 276), readers have the feeling that they are one of the members of Whilomville society. If told by Henry's focalization, the after-fire comments and portrayals would have been unreliable since the townspeople think that the fire not only has damaged Henry's face, but also his mental stability. Therefore, the diegesis would have put a distance between Henry and readers resulting in the failure of an affective identification. By making a formal choice in deliberately employing an extra-diegetic narrator, Crane calls for an empathetic response from his readers.

Multiplicity of settings, including the barbershop, children's party, the houses of doctor Trescott, Alek Williams, judge Hagenthorpe, where readers are exposed to daily conversations taking place among the townspeople is another formal choice by Crane leading to arousal of empathy for Henry Johnson. By providing the mainstream through different characters and places

in the diegesis, Crane offers a panorama for readers to comprehend the dynamics prevalent in society. Instead of the term point of view or perspective, Mieke Bal uses focalization which is "the relationship between the 'vision', the agent that sees, and that which is seen" (Bal, 1997: 146). When taken to the house of Alek Williams, Henry Johnson's close friend, the diegesis focalizes on Alek and his thoughts about the so-called monster:

> *Raikon I got good appetite, an' sleep jes like er dog, but he—he's done broke me all up. 'Tain't no good, nohow. I wake up in the night; I hear 'im, mebbe, er-whimperin' an' er- whimperin', an' I sneak an' I sneak until I try th' do' to see if he locked in. An' he keep me puzzlin' an' er-quakin' all night long. Don't know how'll do in th' winter. Can't let 'im out where th' chillen is. He'll done freeze where he is now. (404)*

Complaining about the fact that he cannot sleep well, and his children are afraid of Henry, Alek Williams lacks the ability to empathize with his friend whose face has been deformed because of the fire. What is more, he asks for more money to keep taking care of Henry. Thanks to this focalization, readers are presented a window looking through the mind of Alex Williams, which in turn leads them to evaluate his view of Henry and how moral it is. In Mieke Bal's words, "Character-bound focalization can vary, can shift from one character to another, even if the narrator remains constant. In such cases, we may be given a good picture of the origins of a conflict. We are shown how differently the various characters view the same facts" (Bal, 1997: 148). To reflect how other characters feel about Henry, Crane brings some of them together in a barbershop where they comment on the dreadful fire and how Doctor Trescott takes great care of Henry upon his courage to save Jimmie at the cost of his face and therefore his identity. A man in the barbershop named Bainbridge comments: "Oh, he should have let him die" (407). Upon Bainbridge's opinion which has nothing to do with emotional identification, another man poses a question: "How can you let a man die when he has done so much for you" (407). Then another client who has been silent throughout the debate begins to speak: "If I had been the doctor, I would have done the same thing" (407). By focalizing on different characters, Crane turns an ordinary barbershop into a court of conscience where contrary ideas on ethics are articulated. Due to this formal technique, readers are involved in this public trial as jury members who are given a responsibility to render a verdict in a just and ethical way. Being exposed to the different ways in which Henry Johnson is portrayed, readers improve different attitudes towards these characters as Bal clearly reflects as:

> *On the level of the story, characters differ from each other. In that sense they are individual. On the basis of the characteristics they have been allotted, they each function in a different way with respect to the reader. The latter gets to know them more or less than other characters, finds them more or less appealing, identifies more or less easily with them. (Bal, 1997: 115)*

Another aesthetic quality that contributes to the overall theme of the novella and the level of empathy in readers is the unpredictability in the portrayal of some characters such as the chief of the police and the judge of the village. Both the police and the judge do not act in a way that is expected from them and that is why their deviation from the stereotypical roles assigned to them results in a shock that leads readers to be alert throughout the diegesis. As Bal has stated: "If presented in opposition to the referential characteristics, such 'deviant' characters can be a powerful trigger of surprise, suspense, or humour" (Bal, 1997: 120). In this case, this deviation encourages readers to think about the reason why Crane deconstructs the normative attributions. Judge Hagenthorpe thinking that Henry Johnson ought to die tells Doctor Trescott:

*Perhaps we may not talk with propriety of this kind of action, but I am induced to say that you are performing a questionable charity in preserving this negro's life. As near as I can understand, he will hereafter be a monster, a perfect monster, and probably with an affected brain. No man can observe you as I have observed you and not know that it was a matter of conscience with you, but I am afraid, my friend, that it is one of the blunders of virtue. (399)*

While expected to behave as the voice of justice and morality, Judge Hagenthorpe becomes the first character in the diegesis labeling Henry Johnson as a monster just because of his deformed face. When it comes to the chief of the police, he acts against the standards that are expected from him. Upon his finding Henry Johnson roaming around the streets by causing everyone to be afraid, he takes him to the police station and informs Doctor Trescott about the situation. When Trescott asks the chief of the police whether Henry is hurt or not and stoned by anybody, he replies: "Guess there isn't much of him to hurt any more, is there? Guess he's been hurt up to the limit" (414). The police acts as if Henry did not have a soul in the depth of which he feels what it is like to be marginalized and pushed into a corner just because his physical deformation. By attributing such unusual characteristics to the most influential figures in the diegesis, Crane draws a portrait of the society in front of his readers who are triggered to question the dynamics determining the overall attitude towards Henry Johnson.

On the basis of what Wayne Booth calls "the level of reciprocity between author and readers" (Booth, 1989: 180), implying that there is a mutuality in narrative ethics in that it not only affects listeners but also tellers, Crane reproduces the concept of reciprocity through employing its loss between Henry and society after the fire, and thus leaving his readers with an ethical questioning. This change in reciprocity is put into practice through cyclical remarks by Henry and how he is responded centralizing upon the invitation marker. Before the fire, when Henry goes to Miss Bella Farragut's house to invite her to the dance, he acts in an extremely polite way: "Good-evenin', Mis' Fa'gut; good-evenin'. How is you dis evenin'? Is all you' folks well, Mis' Fa'gut" (386). This polite demeanor is preserved and repeated in another scene after the fire when Henry again wants to invite Miss Bella to the dance: "Don' make no botheration, Miss Fa'gut. Don' make no botherations. No, 'deed. I jes drap in ter ax you if you won' do me the proud of acceptin' ma humble invitation to er daince, Miss Fa'gut (413). Though he is internally the same man as before the fire, this time he cannot find reciprocity for his invitation. The glossary articulated by Henry does not show any difference in terms of elegancy and civility. However, readers are able to witness the change of attitude in Miss Bella, acting as a representative of society.

There are also some symbolic codes embedded in the diegesis in Barthesian terminology that contributes to the arousal of empathy in readers. In Chapter 1, while Jimmie is playing by himself, he unintentionally destroys a peony. Upon this, the narrator comments: "Finally, he went to the peony and tried to stand it on its pins, resuscitated, but the spine of it was hurt, and it would only hang limply from his hand. Jim could do no reparation" (381). The destroyed peony symbolizing Henry Johnson represents how in the hands of society, a courteous and elegant man is transformed into a monster in an irrecoverable way. By starting the diegesis with this image, Crane makes readers ready and alert for what is upcoming. Another significant motif in the novella is a novel by Ellen Wood called *East Lynne* in which a train accident happens causing Isabel Vane's face to become unrecognizable. In Crane's "The Monster", a theatre adaptation of this novel is on the show:

> *At the little theatre, which was a varnish and red plush miniature of one of the famous New York theatres, a company of strollers was to play 'East Lynne'. The young men of the town were mainly gathered at the corners in the distinctive groups, which expressed various shades and lines of chumship, and had little to do with any social gradations. (385)*

Crane not only reproduces this literary work in his novella, but also offers a criticism on the discrimination perpetuated by society. It is obvious that there are different groupings in society, which leads to the estrangement and exclusion of people who do not belong. When Henry loses his face, he also loses his identity and presence within the public sphere. Because of the uniqueness of his physical deformation, he cannot find himself any place in any of the existing groups. Involving *East Lynne* as a theatrical performance has one more critical role in the development of the diegesis. By introducing the play for which everyone comes together, Crane sets the ground for the turning point of the novella, which is the fire. Just as they watch the play, the townspeople watch the fire in a passive way as if it was a perfect theatrical moment. To criticize and lay bare the idleness of society, Crane uses the motif of spectatorship, which eventually makes readers contemplate on the horrible stagnancy of the public during the fire.

Though the novella is formally divided into twenty-four short chapters, it mainly revolves around the fire motif and that is why can be divided into two main chapters which are before and after the fire. The significance of fire is pointed out by Gaston Bachelard in his *Psychoanalysis of Fire:*

> *Fire and heat provide modes of explanation in the most varied domains because they have been for us the occasion for unforgettable memories, for simple and decisive personal experiences. Fire is thus a privileged phenomenon which can explain anything. If all that changes slowly may be explained by life, all that changes quickly is explained by fire. (Bachelard, 1964: 7)*

As explained, fire is the source of all the rapid changes with its liveliness and high rate of spread. Involvement of the thematic fire in the diegesis brings about formal changes that shape readers' reading process and ethical stance. Thanks to its transformative power, the fire occupies an important place in the novella both thematically and formally.

The fire not only destroys Henry's face and identity, but also the previous imagery and word choice of both the characters and narrator by demolishing the old system. The old glossary is replaced with a completely new one. Before the fire, Miss Bella talks to her mother about Henry as: "Oh, ma, isn't he divine" (387). Even the narrator reflects his opinion about Henry with positive remarks: "He preserved the polite demeanor of a guest when a waiter spills claret down his cuff. In this awkward situation, he was simply perfect" (386). By using vocabulary such as divine, perfect, civil, and polite, both the narrator and characters take an active role in the definition of Henry and his role in society. However, after the fire, the glossary has been shattered and then reconstructed in a completely opposite way. Alek Williams names Henry as "devil" (405), and Judge Hagenthorpe labels him as a "monster" (400). Just like his face and identity, Henry Johnson's name and voice are eliminated from the diegesis. No one except the doctor calls Henry by his name after the catastrophe. They use terms like devil, monster, it, and creature as if he was an object. These strategic omissions in the structure of the novella lead readers to form an emotional bond with Henry and contribute to the overall empathy aroused in them. The fire causes the irrepressible thoughts, perspectives, and vocabulary to rise from the ashes. This meditative moment gathers

everyone together just as the play 'East Lynne' has done before the fire. The burning house and the street where the townspeople come together turn into a stage on which readers are presented with the biased thoughts and assumptions present within the nature of society. The extreme curiosity of the public, gossips and rumors vibrate with the quick spread of fire. Both the narrator and townspeople become complicit in the spread of fire by fueling it with hypocritical discourse. When a rumor goes among the crowds that Henry has lost his life right after the fire, he turns into a saint-like figure in the eyes of everyone:

*The town halted in its accustomed road of thought, and turned a reverent attention to the memory of this hoster. In the breasts of many people was the regret that they had not known enough to give him a hand and a lift when he was alive, and they judged themselves stupid and ungenerous for this failure. (398)*

However, when they learn that Henry is alive and without a face, they directly turn their back to this brave man and push him into the corner with their changed discourse.

Though Henry's voice is not present in the diegesis after the fire, Crane gives a great place to the parts involving how Henry is treated by the public and how he struggles to save Jimmie from the flames at the risk of his life. To illustrate, five chapters are devoted to the description of the catastrophic fire that changes everything both in form and content. The parts in which Henry, surrounded by flames, tries to find a way out are given in a slow-down which "may work like a magnifying glass" (107) as Mieke Bal has stated. By slowing down the rhythm of the diegesis, Crane expects his readers to focus on Henry's desperate efforts and by that way to improve an empathetic response towards his brave action.

## CONCLUSION

This paper, based on narrative empathy which is a relatively novel research field centralizing upon narratives and their roles in cultivating empathy in readers, presents a broad overview of the certain narrative devices and techniques that Stephen Crane, who was one of the most prolific writers of the 19th century America, employed in his well-known novella "The Monster". Crane, by strategically deciding upon both the thematic and formal elements, stimulates the arousal of empathy in his novella. Narrating how a black man named Henry Johnson, who loses his place in society along with his face following a devastating fire, is dehumanized by society, the novella thematically confronts its readers with ethical dilemmas. As suggested in this paper, in addition to the theme of "The Monster", the formal choices made by Crane including the employment of the title in an ironic way, the multiplicity of settings, the extra-diegetic narrator, the characters who behave in unpredictable ways, symbolic codes such as the destroyed peony, and motifs like the fire, evoke empathy in readers. Appearing as a work challenging the separatism between ethics and aesthetics, the novella acts as evidence for the influential combination of form and content and how they play a crucial role in shaping readers' minds and souls, and in leading them to ethical questionings regarding the real identity of the monster who needs to be tamed, namely society.

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