075. Polysemy and suspense as literary and political style: Parabolic narratives of "Jackals and Arabs" and "The Silence of the Sirens"

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Abstract

Parable is a genre of oral and written literature, usually utilized to convey ethical and moral lessons. Yet, Kafka's parabolic stories, "Jackals and Arabs" and "The Silence of the Sirens" undermine any dominant perspective by transforming the conventions of the parable genre: when socially controversial matters are presented through the parable form in a modern context, readers come to observe a variety of perspectives simultaneously, instead of a presiding one in the parabolic stories of Kafka. In detail, such a provocative juxtaposition of perspectives is achieved by narrating the story in deliberately secularized parabolic form. In this context, the point in both stories is by no means to teach readers, but the narrative itself shows that possibilities of readings or variety of perspectives are far from being monolithic or limited. In other words, when the perspectives and interpretations are not easily consumable, the parabolic narrative itself formally invites its readers to suspect their own perspectives, sense of belonging and the elements constitutes their identities. Such deliberate opaqueness and resistance to easy interpretation are among the reasons that render Kafka's "Jackals and Arabs" and "The Silence of the Sirens" modern literary works.

Keywords: Parable, parabolic narrative, Kafka

Edebi ve politik üslup olarak çok anlamlılık ve askıda bırakma: "Jackals and Arabs" ve "Silence of the Sirens" meselsi anlatıları

Öz

Mesel, genellikle etik ve ahlaki dersleri iletmek için kullanılan sözlü ve yazılı bir edebiyat türüdür. Ancak Kafka'nın meselsi/parabolik öyküleri "Çakallar ve Araplar" ve "Sirenlerin Sessizliği" eserleri, mesel türünün geleneklerini dönüştürerek her türlü baskın anlatının ve perspektifin bilinçli şekilde altını oyar: Kafka'nın meselsi anlatılarında toplumsal olarak tartışmalı konular mesel biçimi aracılığıyla modern bir bağlamda sunulduğunda, okuyucular tek bir hakim görüş yerine çeşitli bakış açılarını aynı anda gözlemlemeye başlarlar. Daha ayrıntılı olarak bakacak olursak, hikayenin kasıtlı olarak sekülerleştirilmiş meseller biçimde aktarılmasıyla, çatışmalı bakış açılarının kışkırtıcı bir şekilde yan yana getirildiği görülebilir. Bu bağlamda, bu iki öyküde amaç hiçbir şekilde okuyuculara ders vermek değildir, ancak anlatının kendisi, okuma olasılıklarının veya çeşitli bakış açılarının yekpare veya sınırlı olmaktan son derece uzak olduğunu gösterir. Başka bir deyişle, bakış açıları ve yorumlar kolayca tüketilebilir olmadığında, meselsi anlatının kendisi okuyucularını kendi bakış açılarından, aidiyet duygularından ve kimliklerini oluşturan değerlerden şüphe etmeye davet eder.

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Bu türden bilinçli bir opaklık ve kolay yorumlamaya karşı duran edebi bir direnç, Kafka'nın "Çakallar ve Araplar" ile "Sirenlerin Sessizliği"ni modern edebiyatın örneği kılan temel unsurlardır.

Anahtar kelimeler: Mesel, meselsi/parabolik anlatı, Kafka

Introduction

Polysemy is a term that literary studies borrow from linguistics. Opposite to monosemy, a word or an expression could be polysemic when the statement(s) or text(s) in question could be associated with more than one meaning (Vicente and Falkum, 2017). As Ceccarelli (1998, p. 399) states, polysemy in a literary work portends the existence of "multiple meanings" (p. 396), no matter how covert or buried these meanings are. In this vein, strategic ambiguity (Ceccarelli, 1998, p. 404) or hermeneutic indeterminacy (Altieri, 1978, p. 71-72) are forms of polysemy. Such equivocacies enable the author and the text to lead readers to various and often conflicting interpretations and meaning-making experiences. In this way, a literary text resists singular interpretations and makes room for multiple perspectives and perceptions.

Parabolic stories of Kafka have a special place: In terms of literary genre, parables are known to be "short and simple stories. . . which points a moral" (Cuddon, 1992, p. 634). Similarly, parable is defined as a "short fictitious story that illustrates a moral attitude or a religious principle" (Merriam Webster). Considering that polysemy and strategic ambiguity depend on the context of any text, juxtaposition of traditional parables (as texts with moral and frequently religious lessons) in a secular and literary context is a modern literary attitude that invites ambiguity and resistive reading. In this mode of writing and reading, the genre is reshaped into a new form inciting the readers to question the text rather than to learn from it.

In a letter to his editor Martin Buber, Kafka states that readers should not categorize "Schakale und Araber" ("Jackals and Arabs") and "Ein Bericht für eine Akademie" ("A Report to an Academy") as parables since they are not simple religious stories from which readers could draw moral lessons[2] (Gross, 2002, p. 256). Yet, as Gross conveys, Kafka critics have deliberately ignored this call by Kafka and they provided "credible narratives… [and have] become a hunter and hunted for the meaning of the story" (Gross, 2002, p. 256). In this context, this study approaches "Jackals and Arabs" and "Silence of the Sirens" as *parabolic narratives* in genre, as they are deliberately secularized forms of Kafka's parables , both of which are prominent examples of literary ambiguity and suspension.

Such an ambiguity and literary suspension incite readers to read the parabolic stories of Kafka in various ways. As these texts are not simple parables, the narrative itself invites multiple secular interpretations at the same time. In this context, Kafka's "Jackals and Arabs" and "the Silence of the Sirens" are two polysemic parabolic texts (not-parables) that stand out for their narratives resisting any conclusive and definitive reading, which is a modern attitude in terms of the metafictional form and style of the literary works. this paper argues that such a literary form provokes readers to suspect any complete, static and dominant perspectives regarding identity and belonging.

2 On this matter, Gross cites Kauf: "Kafka wrote: "Gleichnisse bitte ich die Stücke nicht zu nennen, es sind nicht eigentlich Gleichnisse . . ." (I ask you not to call the pieces parables, they are actually not parables…)" (Gross, 2002, p. 256). In the same letter, Kafka names the genre as "Tiergeschichte," an "animal story" (qtd. in Gross, 2002, p. 256).

Kafka's "Jackals and Arabs",

"Schakale und Araber" ("Jackals and Arabs", 1917) is one of the parabolic works by Kafka which depicts the curious experience of a European traveler with an Arab and a pack of speaking jackals, all meeting up in a desert. As in many other stories such as "A Report to an Academy" or "The Metamorphosis", Kafka blurs the boundaries between humans and animals (DeKoven, 2016, p. 20). Perhaps, this is why many critics approach the parable of "Jackals and Arabs" with different interpretations. For example, Koelb associates the jackals' strong desire for cleanliness with Kafka's allegedly "fanatical devotion to personal cleanliness" because he "found sexual contact too repulsive to bear" (p. 128–129). Apart from this comment based on the private life of Kafka, some critics write that certain social and religious conflicts were the main motives that led Kafka to compose this work. An example of this view could be that of Iris Bruce, who writes that Kafka's animal imagery in this story serves to "represent Diaspora and acculturated Jews" (p. 80–81). There are other critics such as Rubenstein, who find strong socio-cultural connections in the work and write that the parable is "specifically Jewish material" (1967, p.13).

The arguments above seem plausible and well-grounded in their own contexts and within personal reading experience(s). Yet, this paper aims to focus on the formal characteristics of the narrative in order to explicate how Kafka constructs the parable, rather than to list what the motives or the moral lessons could be derived from the literary work. In this respect, this paper explores why Kafka employs speaking jackals as characters. In this respect, the study first delineates whether this animal imagery has any significance in terms of plot construction. Next, given that the Jackals speak, the paper explicates whether one may claim that there is a real and effective communication between the jackals and the Arab, or the what the function of the narrator is, as a parabolic character. Overall, the parabolic narrative is based on the theme of miscommunication of/on identities, emerging with two clashing types of reasoning at the surface –represented by jackals and Arabs–, which contributes to the inconclusive and rivaling interpretations on the parable at a deeper level. Based on this perspective, this paper explains how "Jackals and Arabs" is successfully subverting the parable genre by bringing it to a secular context, and thus establishes a hermeneutical plane that is open to different and conflicting perspectives. Such a creative use of the narrative is a literary trick that undermines all monolithic and ethnocentric discourses.

"Jackals and Arabs" is a parable that slowly narrates a deep conflict: the narrative starts in a desert where a European traveler camps in an oasis with his[3] unidentified companions. A pack of jackals approaches the traveler, whom they believe to be the savior "from the north" and they praise him for having "the kind of intelligence that is not to be found among Arabs" (Kafka, 1995, p. 408). Jackals despise and hate Arabs on the ground that "they kill animals for food, and carrion they despise" (Kafka, 1995, p. 408). Confused by the events, the European traveler explains to the jackals that he is not competent enough to solve this deep conflict, and adds that "it seems to be a very old quarrel; I suppose it's in the blood, and perhaps will only end with it" (408). This statement excites the pack, and the oldest jackal replies: "you are very clever; what you have just said agrees with our old tradition. So we shall draw blood from them and the quarrel will be over" (p. 408).

3 We have no solid clue in the parable that the European traveler is a male. Considering that the parable has first person narration, no personal pronouns are used to help, but "I". The only clue one might have is indirect: one might argue that the European traveler is a Messianic figure (Sokel 129), which could help justify the use of male personal pronoun for this European traveler from the north and without a name. For the ease of writing and reading, this paper will use "he" for the narrator/European traveler.

Following this miscommunication and misunderstanding, the jackals' demand that the traveler slit the throats of Arabs with a pair of very old rusty scissors that would "end the quarrel which divides the world" (Kafka, 1995, p. 408). They would not do it themselves as they cannot stand the smell of Arabs. The scene changes by the entrance of the Arab with his whip, who gives a camel carcass to the pack, and this makes jackals forget everything. Whipping the backs of the jackals, the Arab character finishes the parable/narrative with the following statement in a cheerful tone: "Marvelous creatures, aren't they? And how they hate us!" (Kafka, 1995, p. 408).

The story is told in the first person narration. Usually, first-person-narrators are seen to be unreliable, as readers are limited to the perspective of the narrator. However, this does not seem to be the case for the European traveler of "Jackals and Arabs." First of all, he does not belong to the people of Arabs, or to the pack of jackals. At the very beginning of the narrative, the narrator states that they "...were camping in the oasis" and his companions "were asleep" (Kafka, 1995, p. 407). Therefore, the narrator is a member of a third group, other than Arabs or jackals. What is more, the narrator separates himself from the other groups. For instance, the narrator tells the readers that jackals manage to approach him as he "forgets to kindle the pile of firewood which lay ready to smoke away jackals" (Kafka, 1995, p. 408). Therefore, the first point about the narrator is that he is not a member or supporter of either group. This formal choice in the narrative contributes to the narrative's capacity to keep the progress of events in suspension, not allowing any specific perspective or discourse to become dominant. This is also one of the formal characteristics of Kafka's parabolic narrative, which establishes the hermeneutic/interpretive space that is open to speculation.

The second formal detail about the narrator is the way he becomes a part of the conflict between jackals and Arabs; clearly, this is not his choice. Rather, the situation is imposed on him. It is the jackals that approach the European traveler, as if the jackals "needed [his] warmth" (Kafka, 1995, p. 407). The jackals see the narrator as the expected savior, which has led some critics to argue that the jackals took him as the Messiah (Sokel, 2002, p. 129). Indeed, the parable contains textual evidence to support this idea: the jackals had been "waiting [for him] endless years . . . right back to the first mother of the jackals" (Kafka, 1995, p. 408). Therefore, it is the beliefs and the reasoning of the jackals that make the narrator a part of the conflict.

In addition to his relative objectivity, the narrator is also inquisitive in style; he wants to learn and understand, instead of taking sides quickly. This becomes more apparent when the jackals are about to articulate their demands: "It is by pure chance that I have come here from the North, and I am making only a short tour of your country. What do you jackals want, then?" (Kafka, 1995, p. 408). In this statement and the question afterwards, the narrator's impartiality and curious tone becomes more visible.

Another question about the narration is how the jackals see the narrator. For jackals, the narrator is the rational one, perhaps the embodiment of reason. Even though jackals have no clue about who this traveler is, they praise him for having a certain kind of reason that they need. The oldest jackal speaks to the narrator: "You have the kind of intelligence not to be found among Arabs." In fact, this is one of the most important moments in the parabolic narrative, because the scene makes the readers ask some significant questions: why do the jackals associate the narrator with intelligence or reason? Or, what kind of reason might that be? What could be the use of this reason? All these questions lead us to the basic flaw of the jackals, the ethnocentrism represented in their characterization. If ethnocentrism were to be defined as "the tendency for humans to hold up their own group or culture as a standard, seeing it

as superior to others" (Keith, 2010, p. 12), jackals in Kafka's parabolic narrative should be very good examples for it. What jackals exactly do is to evaluate everything from a fixed and limited point of view. At first, jackals take the narrator/European traveler as a savior, even though the traveler openly articulates that he is just there by accident. This is the first moment of miscommunication, which is to be repeated over and over again by jackals.

The jackals' reasoning and source of knowledge are based on the inheritance of these from one generation to the next; they do not question their lives or positions. On the contrary, they act in the way their ancestors did. Here is what the eldest jackals say:

> "I am the oldest jackal far and wide. I am delighted to have met you here at last. I had almost given up hope, since we have been waiting endless years for you; my mother waited for you, and her mother, and all our foremothers right back to the first mother of all the jackals. It is true, believe me!" (Kafka, 1995, p. 408).

Consequently, jackals are trapped by their infertility. The narrative does not state the reasons for such a state of impotence, which contributes to textual ambiguity and literary indeterminacy. Jackals' case is even worse than just being stuck; as they see the world by categorizing everything and everyone in accordance with limited perspectives fueled by their passion. As stated in the above quotation, for the jackals, the narrator/European traveler is the savior/Messiah figure whom they had been waiting for generations. It does not matter how much the narrator refutes this expectation. If he does not accept the position given to him, jackals use their teeth to make him accept.

That is the problematic way the jackals see and approach the narrator/European traveler. In a similar way, their relationship with the Arabs is equally troublesome, as seen in the disparaging remarks of jackals about Arabs: "Not a spark of intelligence, let me tell you, can be struck from their cold arrogance. They kill animals for food, and carrion they despise" (Kafka, 1995, p. 408). Jackals identify reason particularly with their own style and the behavior of eating (carrion). If the others (that is, anyone other than jackals) eat or behave in a different style, they are labeled as unintelligent or unreasonable. In the parabolic narrative, this is the reason jackals detest Arabs.

Returning to the focus of this study, the clash between the jackals and Arabs, as well as the multiplicity of reasonable interpretations of the parabolic narrative are hidden in the turning point of the story, where the miscommunication and misunderstanding between the jackals and the narrator are revealed. In the climax, the jackals assign the narrator the position of a savior. Yet, his answer to the jackals is a refusal, with the expression of inability to understand and help. The narrator's reply is as follows: "Maybe, maybe I said. I do not presume to have any judgment in matters that are so remote from myself. It seems to be an ancient dispute. It probably lies in the blood, and thus perhaps end only with blood" (Kafka, 1995, p. 408). Hearing this, all the jackals get excited and start to pant more quickly.

This is a scene of misunderstanding (Sokel, 2002, p. 129) and it forms another reason for ambiguity in meaning or literary indeterminacy. At this point, the narrator refers to the nature of the problem; what he means is that the clash is so old but still so fresh that one may expect it to continue eternally, until everyone dies. However, the limited perception and ethnocentrism of the jackals make them misunderstand this speech and arrive at a misleading conclusion. In fact, jackals only pay attention to the word "blood" and they are stuck in the conceptual meaning of the word and the language. Lexically, jackals are trapped in such a monosemy; that is, in their repeated inclination to perceive the world through a single perspective with clear, unambigious but biased way. In other words, jackals are so stuck

in their nature/perspective that they cannot comprehend anything outside and above their views. Kafka's jackals speak human language, but they are unable to understand what is really being told. This point in the narrative indicates a problem of access to points of view laid out by others. In a larger framework, this is also an allusion to interpersonal means of communication and a reference to a function of literature. To be more precise, the link between signifier and signified is broken in this example; the narrator's use of figurative language is perceived literally and in a monosemic way by the jackals. The parable thus draws attention to the issue of miscommunication by keeping the narrative in suspense once more, not allowing any sides to become dominant.

This misunderstanding leads them to the only way of living they know: drawing blood from the Arabs. They demand that the narrator cut the throats of the Arabs with a rusty scissor. Here, the imagery used by Kafka supports the argument of this study: The reasoning of jackals is not only different from those of the Arabs or the narrator, but also their logic is infertile and even destructive. First, following the misunderstanding, jackals demand the narrator to use rusty scissors to kill Arabs. Simply, they are attempting to use a wrong/useless and harmful instrument to solve their problems. To be able to use a pair of scissors, one must have hands, and the jackals lack hands, by their nature. The parable takes it one point further, and shows that jackals are stuck in their nature and ineffective ways. The scissors are old and rusty, which implies that many generations have been trying to use it, but could not get a satisfactory result. Then, one may claim that jackals are not learning from their faults, either.

What is more, the jackals are unable to kill the Arabs by their own means. This is so, as "the mere sight of [Arabs'] living flesh makes [jackals] turn tail and flee into cleaner air" (Kafka, 1995, p. 409). Once again, jackals show that they are unable to get over their physical limitations, that is why they have needed and will continue to need a savior figure. Kafka's parabolic narrative is full of examples of this sort: In another scene, when the narrator is unwilling to cooperate with the jackals, two of them lock their teeth to the coat and shirt of the narrator, and thus exert both physical and psychological pressure upon him, which is reminiscent of the two-guard scene in *The Trial* (Sokel, 2002, p. 131).

Another example for the monolithic, ineffectual and destructive reasoning (exemplified by the jackals) could be found in the imagery of teeth. For jackals, the world and people can only be understood with the only instrument they have: the teeth. For instance, when addressing the narrator, the eldest jackal utters: "O Noble heart and kindly bowels" (Kafka, 1995, p. 409). The reference to the taste as a way to measure things is apparent in this scene. Similarly, in the conversation between the traveler and the eldest jackal, jackals defend their offensive behavior against the narrator:

> Your conduct hasn't exactly inclined me to grant it," said I. "Don't hold it against us that we are clumsy," said he, and now for the first time had recourse to the natural plaintiveness of his voice, "we are poor creatures, we have nothing but our teeth; whatever we want to do, good or bad, we can tackle it only with our teeth (Kafka, 1995, p. 409).

Even in the peak moment of their violence, jackals refer to their helplessness[4]. In the parable jackals are so ineffective that even there is no use of their teeth: ironically, they cannot use it to kill Arabs, as they "cannot stand the living flesh" (Kafka, 1995, p. 408), showing once again that jackals' nature is also their prison. It is also quite striking that Jackals use their mouth both to speak and bite, yet their

4 Bruce argues that the animal imagery in "Jackals and Arabs" could be evaluated within the context of Zionism and its problems (2007, p. 80-81).

communicative skills are limited and they seem to believe in the idea that their bite is much more efficacious in solving their problems.

As the story progresses, jackals reveal their goal of killing Arabs. In doing so, they desire to "suck blood" (Kafka, 1995, p. 409) from the carcasses as much as they want. The jackals' futile talk and their arrest of the narrator are interrupted by the whip of Arab, which scares them away. The jackals flee as a group and unite in the distance. Throughout the narrative, this movement is repeated habitually, but never an individual and/or independent movement is observed. Therefore, the jackals exist only as a pack and there is no individuality or distinctive behavior within the group. Nor the oldest jackal is the wisest; his only function is to vocalize the demands of the group. In this sense, the oldest jackal is just another jackal in the pack.

In terms of the structure of the parabolic narrative, the striking difference between the reasoning of the jackals and that of the Arabs is underlined through the portrayal of the Arabs. The first strong contrast between the jackals and the Arabs is in tone: The Arabs are cheerful in tone in comparison to seriousness of the jackals:

> So you've been treated to this entertainment too, sir," said the Arab, laughing as gaily as the reserve of his race permitted. "You know, so long as Arabs exist, that pair of scissors goes wandering through the desert and will wander with us to the end of our days. Every European is offered it for the great work; every European is just the man that Fate has chosen for them. They have the most lunatic hopes, these beasts; they're just fools, utter fools. That's why we like them; they are our dogs; finer dogs than any of yours (Kafka, 1995, p. 410).

The Arab never takes the jackals seriously. In his mise-en-scène, Arab gives the camel carcass to the jackals in a joyous, relaxed and self-confident tone. Frantically, jackals forget their place and mission: "As if irresistibly drawn by cords each of them began to waver forward, crawling on his belly. They had forgotten the Arabs, forgotten their hatred, the all-obliterating immediate presence of the stinking carrion bewitched them" (410). Jackals get closer to the ground (reminiscent of a reptile, the opposite of being in an upright position,) in their attempt to feed themselves parasitically. Similarly, when on the top of the carcass, jackals are "laboring in common, piled mountain-high" (411). Then, jackals all unite in their parasitic position.

Koelb argues that Kafka sympathized with the jackals (2010, p. 128). But are they the same jackals that any reader might sympathize with? In other words, are the jackals the same ones whose only desire is "cleanliness" (Kafka, 1995, p. 409)? Considering that jackals are now completely under the control of the Arab and his whip, and seeing that their appetite and passion for rotten flesh are stronger than their reason, one can claim that the purity perspective of jackals turned them into nothing but blood-sucking creatures. Then, they are the source of their own disaster.

The jackals' constant wait for a savior figure without changing themselves, and Arabs' flexibility created a hierarchical relationship in the narrative world, in which jackals turn into parasitical creatures. This also creates the parabolic narrative's structural emphasis on the difference of two kinds of reasons, represented by jackals on one hand, and Arabs on the other. Here, the story focuses much more on the stuckness of the Jackals in their own perspectives. It would clearly be a misreading to attribute any superiority to Arabs' perspective, as the narrative just uses the Arab imagery here to emphasize or underline this reciprocal, problematic and parasitic relationship.

To sum, Kafka's parabolic narrative employs several literary tricks that invite literary ambiguity and textual indeterminacy; hence, a variety of interpretations. Among these are unreliable narrator, animal imagery that is open to interpretation, miscommunication among characters, ethnocentrism of groups, body parts such as mouth used for both speaking and biting as a way to contact with the world, as well as the group memory of the jackals. The literary strategies explained here help transform the genre of traditional parable into a modern and secular context.

"The Silence of the Sirens": Kafka and literary suspension

Similar to the "Jackals and Arabs", "The Silence of the Sirens" makes it difficult to reach an easy interpretation. In other words, Kafka's reading/writing of Homer's sirens from *The Odyssey* continuously postpones any conclusive meaning-making attempts. Kafka's "Silence of the Sirens" is a rewriting of Homer's version of the myth. Similar to "Jackals and Arabs", "Silence of the Sirens" displays some characteristics of textual suspension, and Kafka situates suspense at the very center of his literary imagination.

This study reads Kafka's "The Silence of the Sirens" in connection with the Odysseus-Sirens chapter within Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and Homer's *The Odyssey*. Even though these works belong to different genres (namely, epic, critical theory, parable/parabolic narrative[5]), as Stathis Gourgouris explicates, they are different sorts of "poïesis" over the myth of sirens (2003, p. 163) and this creates the basis of comparative discussion. In this respect, whether it be in the dialectical thought or in the form of parable, these works display the traces of different conceptions of the mythic narrative.

Suspense, or suspension as a literary concept, is significant in terms of contextualizing Kafka's parabolic short fiction. In a literary dictionary, suspense is defined as follows:

> Anticipation as to the outcome of events . . . Suspense is a major device for securing and maintaining interest. It may be either of two major types: in one, the outcome is uncertain and the suspense resides in the question of who or what or how; in the other; the outcome is inevitable from foregoing events and the suspense resides in the audience's anxious or frightened anticipation, in the question of when (Holman, 1986, p. 504–505).

Yet, this definition falls short of explaining the element of suspense in Kafka's "The Silence of the Sirens". There are several types of literary suspension in the works of Kafka. For instance, Levine[6] explains how various forms of suspension could be detected in several Kafka works: He puts forward that suspension is not only physical as in "hang suspended in the air like a trapeze artist" (Levine, 2008, p. 1040), but also there are "gestures associated with forms of suspension . . . with a grasp that is not that of understanding, a grasp that instead dislocates understanding from within and makes of this creative *misunderstanding*[7] a means by which to get a different hold on things" (Levine, 2008, p. 1041). Additionally, there are other "modes of artistic and interpretive suspension" (1041), such as the locus of Gregor's room, "which gradually opens within the text" (1044). Similarly, in the same article Levine writes that in "The Judgment" suspension is associated with "inter-dimensional space" (p. 1045), whereas the ending of the story is interwoven with a "double suspension" (p. 1050). Also, time itself

5 This paper discusses to what extent Kafka's "The Silence of the Sirens" could be read as a parable/parabolic story. Similarly, Benjamin discusses convincingly that those literary borders are not so clear-cut for Kafka, stating that Ulysses in the parable of "The Silence of the Sirens" "stands at the dividing line between myth and fairy tale" (799).

6 Levine, M. G. (2008). "A Place so Insanely Enchanting": Kafka and the Poetics of Suspension. *MLN*, *123*(5), 1039–1067. http://www.jstor.org/stable/29734453

7 Emphasis belongs to Levine.

might be the point of suspension, as well (Levine, 2008, p. 1064). It is possible to find similar examples on suspension in Kafka. Then, it should be underlined that suspension could be thematic, structural, time or locus-based, and among others.

Regarding the parables, in "Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of His Death", Walter Benjamin provides readers with an overview of Kafka's works, and also focuses on the significance of gestures in Kafka; the connection between the gestures and the cloudy spots. He contends that

> Kafka had a rare capacity to create parables for himself. Yet his parables are never exhausted by what is explainable; on the contrary, Kafka's parabolic narratives resist the interpretations of his writings. One has to find one's way in them circumspectly, cautiously and warily" (Benjamin, 2005, p. 804).

As Michael Levine states "Kafka's parables [. . .] fail to present any doctrine. Rather than dissolving into semantically transparent means of instruction, they remain cloudy and opaque" (2008, p. 120). In this respect, Kafka's parables do not function in the same way an *apologue*[8] would; a reader cannot approach Kafka's parables to learn or get any moral message, as the text itself structurally or thematically does not allow for such an easy and one-level reading. Then, Benjamin is right in that Kafka's parables are not transparent enough to provide an easy meaning or lesson to readers. In this respect, Kafka's fiction cannot be reduced to a certain kind of truth.

Many times in Kafka's texts, not only certain characters, but also the alternative meanings and interpretations might come up, like parasites, at any moment that the reader may think that the meaning is apparent. To explain this literary technique and narrative skill better, this paper will now focus on another reading of the Odysseus-Sirens myth, which is unlike Kafka's text in this sense.

In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer point to a curious connection between enlightenment and mythology: they claim "just as myths already entail enlightenment; with every step Enlightenment entangles itself more deeply in mythology" (2020, p. 8). Enlightenment since Bacon, they write, in spite of its vision to demythologize and put instrumental reason to use, contains the elements of mythical thinking. In a similar way, mythology has much in common with enlightenment, as well. Adorno and Horkheimer exemplify this idea via the Odysseus and the Sirens myth.

In *Dialectics of Enlightenment*, Odysseus is portrayed as an exemplar of enlightened subject who continuously attempts to dominate nature, restore his position as a ruler over his people, and what is more, keep all his feelings and desires under control while doing these. Similar to the enlightened individual Adorno and Horkheimer describe at length, the greatest flaw of Odysseus is his self-preservation, which they define as the backbone of the bourgeois economy, "where each individual is mediated by the principle of the self" (2020, p. 22-23). This self-preservation is functional and important particularly for the survival of Odysseus; however, it also marks the moment when "reason's old ambition to be purely an instrument of purposes has finally been fulfilled" (2020, p.23). According to Horkheimer and Adorno, this is exactly a kind of irrationality that civilization avoids.

The twelfth book of *The Odyssey*, Odysseus's journey to the land of Sirens, is presented as this kind of "intertwinement of myth, power and labor" (1996, p. 25). Yet the relationship of Odysseus to his men, to the Sirens or to himself embodies the self- destructiveness of the bourgeois self-preservation principle, which is connected with the idea of domination over nature and others.

8 "A moral fable" (Holman 36).

To avoid the Sirens, Odysseus asks his men to plug their ears with wax, whereas he has himself tied to the mast to hear the song, but being unable to move, he would be safe while all his men are pulling the oars. With the order of pulling oars but not listening to the song of Sirens, Odysseus becomes an oppressor, as all his men are only reduced to muscle power; or in Adorno and Horkheimer's terminology, "they are made practical" (2020, p. 26). But this is not all; the men are also deprived of the experience of listening to the song of the Sirens. Even though they are aware that there is/will be a song, they are urged to focus on a particular job and keep away from this "beauty . . . to reproduce the life of the oppressor" (p. 27). The rovers in the epic are "unable to speak to one another, are all harnessed to the same rhythms, like modern workers in factories, cinemas and the collective . . . which enforce conformism." (Horkheimer, Adorno, 2020, p. 29). Then, the relationship of Odysseus to his men is similar to those in a capitalist society where human beings are reduced to certain functions.

On the other hand, Odysseus's instrumental reason is equally limiting and destructive for himself. When he has tied to the mast of his ship, he takes a precaution to protect himself, but he also strictly limits his capacity of movement and is only reduced to the movement of the neck. If Sirens are taken as the power of nature to control, Odysseus partly manages this by protecting himself and going past them, but he has to pay for this with his freedom. In addition to this, as Adorno and Horkheimer state, "what he hears has no consequences on him" (2020, p. 26-27). He hears, but similar to his men, he cannot really listen and let himself fully experience the beauty of the song.

Here, both the servant and the master have to experience a regression; as Horkheimer and Adorno write, "continuance of domination demands the fixation of instincts by greater repression" (2020, p. 27). The total experience is reduced to the survival of the ship and the crew. This survival could be understood in a similar way to the material production in a society. Under such circumstances, only progress matters, as in the progress of the ship, Odysseus and his men. Yet, in their quasi-advancement, they must either tie themselves to the mast, or plug their ears, which, shows how their lives and choices are constantly restrained through the journey in one way or another. As Adorno and Horkheimer state, this is by no means a coincidence but "the curse of irresistible progress is irresistible regression" (2020, p. 28). The self-preservation, master-slave relationship, the desire to control nature are all interwoven in Odysseus's adventure. In such an analogy, the song of the Sirens represents the art; Odysseus and his men are either deaf to it, or they can only experience it in a limited way, which is also destructive (van Reijen, 1988, p. 61).

Dialectic of Enlightenment discusses that "myth is already enlightenment, and enlightenment reverts to mythology" (2020, p. xviii). This seems to be a contradiction in itself, but Adorno and Horkheimer aim to show how values of bourgeois culture and the enlightenment ideals could be destructive. In "The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment", Habermas calls this attempt the "conceptualization of the self-destructive process of Enlightenment" (1982, p. 13). This is how Adorno and Horkheimer interpret Odysseus and sirens myth. For them, the Odysseus myth contains the tracks of a certain historical and economical way of life, which can be traced backwards from the 20th century. Yet, in Kafka's parabolic story "The Silence of the Sirens" is a different kind of *poïesis*, which is more open to different perspectives and interpretations.

Perhaps, one of the greatest differences between Homer's sirens and those of Kafka lies in the silence of the latter. Here is Homer's version, where goddess Circe gives advice to Odysseus:

> First of all, you'll run into the Sirens.
> They seduce all men who come across them.
> Whoever unwittingly goes past them
> and hears the Sirens' call never gets back.
> His wife and infant children in his home
> will never stand beside him full of joy.
> No. Instead, the Sirens' clear-toned song
> will captivate his heart. They'll be sitting
> in a meadow, surrounded by a pile,
> a massive heap, of rotting human bones
> encased in shriveled skin. Row on past them.
> Roll some sweet wax in your hand and stuff it
> in your companions' ears, so none of them
> can listen. But if you're keen to hear them,
> make your crew tie you down in your swift ship.
> Stand there with hands and feet lashed to the mast.
> They must attach the rope ends there as well.
> Then you can hear both Sirens as they sing.
> You'll enjoy their song. If you start to beg
> your men, or order them, to let you go,
> make sure they lash you there with still more rope.
>
> (*The Odyssey*, Book XII 47–67)

Here in the original version of the myth, Odysseus uses the practical advice he gets from Circe in order to get over the *more-than-human* obstacle, which is the Sirens in this example. Yet, in Kafka's parable, the events in the myth are depicted in a very different way, and the perspective in the work frequently changes. From the beginning to the end, the parable is narrated in the third person. Yet, by changing the perspective, the narrator frequently attempts to evaluate the events from another perspective (Ulysses's, Sirens', his, or other people's). This is exactly how we learn something new with each upcoming paragraph. As the new perspective is involved in the parable, the previous meaning is perpetually postponed or nullified. Perhaps, in this case, this is how Homer's version of the myth becomes nullified or invalidated. Therefore, Kafka's narrative structure in "The Silence of the Sirens" playfully displays a successful example of such quick shifts, which postpones a solid meaning perpetually.

The short parabolic story is told in the past tense from the beginning to the end. Therefore, readers know that the events are now in the distant past. However, in terms of the narrative structure, the events are far from being clear. On the contrary, everything is blurry and neither the readers nor the narrator knows the real reason and the nature of Ulysses's safe passage through the Siren rocks (which is different from Homer's version). Then, the narrative structure or the parable itself becomes an attempt to question the underlying reasons of this voyage, as well as to find answers. Now in Kafka's story, it becomes hard to claim that Circe is the enhancer, unlike in Homer's version. We simply do not know anything for sure, neither does the narrator. This covertly curious and inquisitive attitude is exactly opposite of what might be expected from a parable.

Below is an account of Kafka's playful narrative questioning of the Ulysses/Odysseus myth. The parable opens with the mythic time: "To protect himself from the Sirens, Ulysses stopped his ears with a wax and had himself bound to the mast of his ship" (Kafka, 1995, 430). Up to now, there is nothing different from the Homeric text, as readers, we are in the mythic world and the mythic time, where the events are depicted by an omniscient third person, similar to the literary style of *in medias res*. However, the narration quickly changes perspective and the reader is taken down to the level of everyman at a moment's notice: "but it was known to all that such things were of no help" (Kafka, 1995, 431). In the next sentence, once more, the narrator gets back to mythic time, and sets the rules of that world: "The song of the Sirens could pierce through everything, and the longing of those they seduced would have broken far stronger bonds than chains and masts" (Kafka, 1995, 431). Then, the narration makes the reader see the picture through Ulysses's eyes: "Ulysses did not think of it. He trusted absolutely to his handful of wax, and in innocent elation over his little stratagem sailed out to meet the Sirens" (Kafka, 1995, 431). In other words, the narrative keeps changing the perspective and does not allow one view to become dominant. This is one of the ways the story keeps the flow of events in suspension.

One significant element in the rewriting of the Homeric myth by Kafka is that the Sirens are now silenced; they do not sing their deadly song. The reason is again unclear; yet the text portrays their silence as "another fatal weapon" (Kafka, 1995, 431). Therefore, the antagonism between man and nature, humans and deities; or Odysseus and the Sirens is still there. "No earthly power can resist" the silence of the Sirens (Kafka, 1995, 431). To sum up the progress up to now, Ulysses (like everyone), knows that his wax and chain are not functional, but he still chooses to progress. Yet, the Sirens have a "more fatal weapon" –, which is their silence. In Kafka's version of the myth, roles are now reversed: Ulysses' cunning becomes "an inadequate and childish measure" (Kafka, 1995, 430), whereas the Sirens are now silenced and become helpless in spite of their "more fatal weapon" (Kafka, 1995, 431).

But why do the Sirens forget to sing? They do forget it, due to the "look of bliss on the face of Ulysses, who was thinking of nothing but his wax and chains, made them forget singing" (Kafka, 1995, 431). At this point, Kafka's narrative style gets similar to modern cinema, where the movie can focus in and out of the minds of each character. Here is another question: why does *not* the "more fatal weapon" the silence, harm Ulysses? It does not, because "he did not hear their silence, he thought they were singing and that he alone did not hear them" (Kafka, 1995, 431). In this scene, passivity becomes as influential as activity. This is the exact moment that the difference between activity and passivity are suspended.

Then, one might safely assert that with the "inadequate or childish measure" Sirens are stripped of their fatal power, which is another significant reversal in Kafka's parable. What is more, the original seducers, the Sirens, are now in the position of the seduced by the gaze of Ulysses: "For a fleeting moment, he saw their throats rising and falling, their breasts lifting, their eyes filled with tears, their lips half-parted. . . They (Sirens) had no longer any desire to allure; all that they wanted was to hold as long as they could the radiance that fell from Ulysses's great eyes" (Kafka, 1995, 431). Then, who was once the seducer becomes seduced, which is another important twist of the parable. Still, it is ironic that Ulysses gains this power by being powerless, which is an additional moment of suspension of meaning in Kafka's "The Silence of the Sirens".

Kafka does not finish the parable and the quick shifts of perspective at this point. He even has more to offer. In the subjunctive mode, which is clearly different from the mythic time or the narrative time, the narrator justifies that "if the Sirens had possessed consciousness, they would have been annihilated that

moment" (Kafka, 1995, 431). This reasoning may be another example for the playful shifts of perspective by the narrator.

Finally, Kafka prepares one more surprise to readers and he incorporates a codicil into the parable, "which has been handed down" (Kafka, 1995, 431); note the shift in the narrative time from past to the present. This codicil states that "Ulysses was so full of guile, was such a fox, that not even the goddess of fate could pierce his armor" (Kafka, 1995, 431). Up to now, Kafka's parable had already deconstructed the Homeric myth, but the narrator goes one step further and through *the codicil just handed down*, he deconstructs his own deconstruction, which is another element of suspension in the narrative. The codicil's primary function here is to keep the playful tone of continuous deconstruction, rather than offering a new solid interpretation or meaning.

Probably, this is exactly what Benjamin meant, when he wrote that "[Kafka] was pushed to the limits of understanding at every turn, and he liked to push others to them as well" (2005, p. 804). Then, the deliberate and continuous shifts of perspective and time in Kafka's parabolic story "The Silence of the Sirens" keeps all the meaning in suspension and shows readers that there are always alternative and equally valid perspectives.

Conclusion

"The Jackals and Arabs" and "The Silence of the Sirens" are two parabolic stories that deliberately complicate the meaning-making process for their readers. Stories of Kafka achieve this through a series of techniques. To begin with, Kafka restructures the genre of parable and replaces it in the modern context. In this sense, recontextualizing mythic stories in a modern frame of reference (mythopoiesis, or mythmaking in the example of "Silence of the Sirens") aims to disturb the reader, demanding him/her to question any dominant values. In this way, these parabolic narratives expect readers to re-explore the meaning of overarching issues regarding belonging, identity, gender and/or nature, all of which are tacitly touched on by the metafictional perspective.

Secondly, by using the genre of parable, Kafka's parabolic stories transform the reading experience: Texts in question no longer teach any moral lessons, as the narratives leave readers with open-ended problems or conflicts, rather than satisfactory conclusions with ethic/moral guides. This argument could also be backed up by extra-textual evidence, such as Kafka's letter to Buber explaining why these stories should not be read as simple parables (Gross, 2002, p. 256). As Kafka reshapes the parables into modern parabolic stories, these narratives become hermeneutically open to further interpretations. Such a deliberately inexhaustible and inconclusive narrative is exactly what makes these stories modern: These texts focus on the *here and now*, without severing ties with the past, because a critical perspective is always called for by the reader. The narratives do not allow readers to be satisfied with one sole perspective, or an idea from the past, present or future. Instead, readers are almost required to understand the present by juxtaposing the other times and possibilities.

Third, the parabolic narratives introduce identities without displaying any attachment to any of them. In both stories, jackals, Arabs, narrators or the Sirens are far from being complete and easily understandable characters. Such opaqueness of the parabolic narratives (Benjamin, 2005, 804) or the deliberate literary suspension open a path in which rivaling interpretations and conflicting perspectives may all coexist. These techniques make Kafka's parabolic narratives modern.

In detail, Kafka's parabolic stories such as "Jackals and Arabs" and "The Silence of the Sirens" break away with the parable tradition in the following ways: Kafka's short stories are deliberately ambiguous, and never offer a clear-cut solution or answer to its readers. Such a deliberate ambiguity enables the narrative to present several conflicts in a short parable, which are usually interconnected. In this respect, Kafka's parables (or parabolic narratives) focus on the problem of power or powerlessness, as most parable characters are power-lacking figures.

In addition to these, as Kafka's parables are not didactic unlike traditional parables, the stories impel readers to ask more questions. In other words, Kafka's understanding of parables is ironic in tone for this reason. What is more, the ironic tone merges with the impasse or the tragic trait of parabolic characters. Despite the brevity of the stories, Kafkaesque parables present complex humane problems. this study discussed to what extent Kafka's "Jackals and Arabs" and "The Silence of the Sirens" are modern retellings of traditional parables, and how Kafka's parabolic narratives break away from a monolithic version of reality in a moral and/or religious sense, through a secular and ironic tone to its readers.

In conclusion, "Jackals and Arabs" and "Silence of the Sirens" thus push the reader to question their views on identity, belonging and gender issues. By transforming the genre of parable in terms of its function, and the parabolic narratives show readers that any judgements in the field of culture are actually interpretations, and that the world of belonging and identities is actually quite open to falsifiable and plural perspectives.

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