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# AKADEMİK PERSPEKTİFTEN DÜNYA DİLLERİ VE EDEBİYATLARI

Editör: Doç.Dr. Fatime Gül KOÇSOY

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# **Akademik Perspektiften Dünya Dilleri ve Edebiyatları**

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Doç.Dr. Fatime Gül KOÇSOY

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2025

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*"Bu kitapta yer alan bölümlerde kullanılan kaynakların, görüşlerin, bulguların, sonuçların, tablo, şekil, resim ve her türlü içeriğin sorumluluğu yazar veya yazarlarına ait olup ulusal ve uluslararası telif haklarına konu olabilecek mali ve hukuki sorumluluk da yazarlara aittir."*

# **THE ACID FRONTIER: CINEMATIC ENTROPY AND THE DEATH OF THE WESTERN MYTH**

**Serap SARIBAŞ<sup>1</sup>**

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The Western genre has long served as a cultural canvas upon which dominant narratives of American identity, expansionism, masculinity, and morality have been projected. As Richard Slotkin (1992) famously asserted, the myth of the frontier became foundational to the American imagination, casting the wilderness as a space where the national self was forged through violence and conquest. However, by the mid-20th century, this grand narrative began to erode under the pressure of countercultural critique, geopolitical disillusionment, and aesthetic experimentation. From this disintegration emerged a cinematic subgenre that would come to be known as the “Acid Western,” a term that signifies not only a formal departure from classical Western tropes but also a radical reconfiguration of the genre's ideological apparatus. Coined by critic Jonathan Rosenbaum (2000), the term “Acid Western” captures a unique synthesis of psychedelic aesthetics, political subversion, and metaphysical inquiry. These films inherit the visual codes of the traditional Western, expansive desert landscapes, lone riders, and frontier violence, but they invert their ideological thrust. In place of rugged individualism, they offer existential drift; instead of manifest destiny, they render spiritual desolation. This inversion is not merely stylistic, but profoundly philosophical. As

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Baudrillard (1983) noted in his analysis of the simulacrum, postmodern cultural products no longer represent reality but instead simulate it, creating layers of hyperreality where myth and critique become indistinguishable (s. 66). Acid Westerns, in this context, become hallucinatory reenactments of a collapsed mythos, cinematic ghost stories about a nation haunted by its own legends.

The historical backdrop of the 1960s and 1970s counterculture is essential to understanding the emergence of the Acid Western. During this period, widespread disillusionment with American imperialism, particularly in Vietnam, coalesced with domestic upheavals around civil rights, sexual liberation, and environmental awareness. The Western, once a narrative of conquest and certainty, now appeared as a relic of ideological hegemony. Directors such as Alejandro Jodorowsky, Monte Hellman, and Alex Cox infused the genre with a new sensibility, blending mysticism, absurdism, and radical politics to critique the very foundations of American exceptionalism. These films often employed psychedelic imagery, nonlinear storytelling, and antiheroic protagonists to explore questions of identity, morality, and historical entropy. Acid Westerns thus operate at the intersection of genre deconstruction and metaphysical exploration. They destabilize the linear temporality and moral clarity typical of classical Westerns, replacing them with fragmented narratives, spectral imagery, and philosophical ambiguity. In doing so, they align with broader postmodern trends in art and literature, particularly those articulated by theorists such as Jean-François Lyotard (1984) and Gilles Deleuze (1989), who emphasized the collapse of grand narratives and the proliferation of affective intensities. In the Acid Western, the frontier is not a space of national destiny but a zone of existential crisis. Time loops, hallucinations, and disjointed spatial logic

create a cinematic environment where meaning itself is rendered unstable.

The aim of this study is to provide a comprehensive examination of the Acid Western as a politically charged and philosophically complex subgenre. Through close readings of seminal films such as *El Topo* (1970), *The Shooting* (1966), *Walker* (1987), *Meek's Cutoff* (2010), and *Zachariah* (1971), this paper will trace how these works simultaneously inherit and subvert the conventions of the Western tradition. Particular attention will be paid to their use of psychedelia, allegory, feminist critique, anti-colonial discourse, and musical experimentation. Each of these elements contributes to a reimagining of the frontier as not a site of resolution, but of persistent ambiguity. Moreover, the Acid Western will be analyzed as a cultural artifact that articulates the anxieties of late modernity. In an era increasingly defined by ecological collapse, political polarization, and digital mediation, these films offer a unique aesthetic vocabulary for grappling with disorientation and loss. Their rejection of narrative closure and moral simplicity resonates with contemporary critiques of neoliberalism, empire, and the commodification of experience. As such, they serve not only as genre experiments but as acts of philosophical resistance, cinematic attempts to think otherwise in a world saturated with ideological simulation. In sum, the Acid Western marks a critical juncture in the evolution of cinematic form and cultural critique. It is a genre that deconstructs while it constructs, that mourns while it mocks, that hallucinates while it historicizes. By tracing its aesthetic strategies and thematic preoccupations, this study seeks to uncover how the Acid Western transforms the mythology of the American West into a visionary terrain of political, metaphysical, and artistic disruption.



## **2. HALLUCINATORY LANDSCAPES AND THE DECONSTRUCTION OF THE FRONTIER**

The terrain of the Western has always been more than a backdrop; it is a psychic and ideological space through which the myth of the American frontier is both imagined and contested. In the Acid Western, this terrain becomes increasingly hallucinatory, not merely reflecting the protagonists' inner turmoil but actively shaping it. Films such as *El Topo* (1970), *The Shooting* (1966), and *Ride in the Whirlwind* (1966) exemplify how landscape becomes an extension of consciousness, a metaphysical mirror through which history, identity, and morality are dissolved. This transformation aligns with Deleuze's (1989) notion of the "time-image," where cinematic time is no longer subordinated to movement but instead opens onto a field of affective and ontological indeterminacy (s. 37). In Jodorowsky's *El Topo*, the desert is not merely a site of survival or conquest but a stage for spiritual and philosophical metamorphosis. The protagonist's journey mirrors a ritualistic initiation, combining Christian iconography, Eastern mysticism, and surreal violence. As Gonzalez (2010) argues, the film's mise-en-scène transforms the desert into an "alchemical crucible," where subjectivity is disassembled and reconstituted through pain, vision, and hallucination (s. 114). Each encounter with a grotesque master becomes a parable, a riddle that undermines linear causality and narrative resolution. The desert in *El Topo* is not crossed; it is endured, inhabited, and ultimately internalized.

Monte Hellman's *The Shooting* similarly constructs its landscape as a psychological void. With minimal dialogue and dislocated chronology, the film resists classical narrative coherence. Characters are propelled not by purpose but by a vague compulsion that borders on madness. The film's aesthetic economy, wide shots, barren terrains, and unexplained violence, evokes what Rosenbaum (2000) calls a "spiritual Western,"

where the genre's moral dualism collapses into spectral ambiguity. The pursuit becomes a loop; the destination, unknowable. Time folds onto itself, and the frontier becomes a Möbius strip of paranoia and dissolution. *In Ride in the Whirlwind*, also directed by Hellman, the hallucinatory effect is more subdued but equally subversive. The film interrogates the arbitrary nature of violence and the fragility of moral codes in an indifferent universe. The protagonists, wrongfully pursued, find no justice, no redemption, only repetition and erasure. As Slotkin (1992) observes, such narratives reverse the mythic function of the Western, offering not the foundation of civilization but the abyss of meaninglessness (s. 621). The landscape here is stripped of its symbolic richness, reduced to an inescapable loop of dust, fear, and silence. These films illustrate how the Acid Western displaces the frontier from a mythic geography of potentiality to a psychological terrain of collapse. The desert no longer signifies promise or purity but becomes a site of ontological rupture. The protagonists' journeys resemble mystical pilgrimages gone awry, haunted by visions, doppelgängers, and abstract violence. As Baudrillard (1983) might contend, the desert is the perfect simulacrum, a place so emptied of referentiality that it becomes a pure signifier of absence (s. 73).

Furthermore, these landscapes problematize the gendered and racialized dimensions of the traditional Western. The heroic white male subject dissolves into figures of impotence, hysteria, or transcendental confusion. The Indigenous presence is often spectral or symbolically overcoded, invoking critique rather than reenactment of colonial tropes. Feminine figures, when present, act as mystical or tragic intermediaries, often embodying a lost harmony with nature or an inaccessible truth. This gendered semiotics recalls Kristeva's (1982) concept of the "abject" that which disrupts identity, system, and order, casting the landscape itself as a site of epistemic anxiety (s. 4). This collapse of spatial

and ideological coherence also opens the Acid Western to ecocritical interpretations. The land, stripped of its romanticized purity, becomes a witness to ecological desolation and human folly. In *Meek's Cutoff* (2010), for instance, the arid landscape functions not only as a challenge to westward movement but also as a silent indictment of human arrogance. Kelly Reichardt's sparse and observational style renders the natural environment not as a backdrop but as a protagonist in its own right, stoic, inscrutable, and ultimately indifferent to human narratives. As Buell (2005) argues in his analysis of the environmental imagination, landscapes in such films cease to be instrumentalized and instead assert an "aesthetic of resistance" to anthropocentric meaning-making (p. 128).

In these hallucinatory topographies, the Western genre's claim to mastery over space dissolves into affective impotence. The characters wander not to map, to conquer, or to civilize, but to experience, often unwillingly, the dissolution of the self. Their travels become allegories of epistemological disorientation, spiritual crisis, and historical fragmentation. As Jameson (1991) suggests, such aesthetic expressions reflect postmodernity's crisis of historicity, where the inability to position oneself in a coherent temporal or spatial continuum becomes a defining condition (p. 21). Thus, the Acid Western's treatment of landscape offers not merely a reimagining of physical space but a critique of the cultural imaginary that once structured it. The desert becomes a screen onto which fears of extinction, erasure, and existential ambiguity are projected. Whether through the surreal crucible of *El Topo*, the voided terrain of *The Shooting*, or the ambivalent barrenness of *Meek's Cutoff*, these films destabilize the frontier as a locus of national pride and instead expose it as a haunted zone of unresolved trauma.

### **3. THE ANTI-HERO AS MYSTIC: PSYCHEDELIA, IDENTITY, AND THE DISSOLUTION OF THE SELF**

The Acid Western disrupts not only genre conventions but also character archetypes, replacing the classical Western hero, stoic, self-reliant, morally decisive, with a wandering mystic, a fractured consciousness adrift in the desert of meaning. These anti-heroes, shaped as much by inner visions as external journeys, often resemble spiritual seekers lost in a hallucinogenic void. Unlike traditional Western protagonists who define themselves through conquest and action, Acid Western figures engage in existential introspection and metaphysical disintegration. The desert becomes not a battleground, but a psychic terrain where the self is dissolved. One of the clearest examples of this is Alejandro Jodorowsky's *El Topo* (1970), where the protagonist undergoes a surreal journey through spiritual trials, death, and rebirth. As Trujillo (2014) observes, the film reconfigures the Western figure as a Christ-like mystic, whose encounters with grotesque characters and symbolic violence reflect a search for transcendence rather than dominance (s. 192). The film's psychedelic visuals, blood-soaked deserts, blind monks, dwarves, and hermits, do not merely serve aesthetic shock but dramatize the protagonist's fragmented psyche and the collapse of coherent identity. This process is similarly evident in *Greaser's Palace* (1972), Robert Downey Sr.'s absurdist take on the life of Christ transposed into a Western setting. The protagonist, Jesse, is a messianic figure whose miracles are both banal and bizarre, reflecting the erosion of meaning in a culture of spectacle. As Bukatman (1998) argues, the film's disjointed narrative and symbolic opacity perform the very dissolution of narrative logic and stable subjectivity that the Acid Western thematizes (s. 104). Jesse, like Jodorowsky's *El Topo*, becomes a cipher through

which the genre critiques both religious iconography and the myth of American moral clarity.

In Jim Jarmusch's *Dead Man* (1995), the dissolution of the self reaches its most poetically minimalist form. William Blake, a meek accountant who becomes an accidental outlaw, undergoes a slow metaphysical transformation as he journeys toward death, guided by the enigmatic Native American Nobody. The film's black-and-white cinematography and Neil Young's dissonant guitar score create a liminal atmosphere where reality appears suspended. As Cummings (2007) notes, Blake's transformation into "a walking ghost" reflects a deeper cultural malaise, in which the American self is no longer coherent or heroic but spectral and hollow (s. 68). These anti-heroes often lack coherent motivations, traditional backstories, or moral conviction. Their journeys are less about completing a quest than about enduring psychic unraveling. Jungian archetypes such as the Shadow and the Anima appear not as symbolic motifs but as narrative structures. The mystical figures they encounter, shamans, prophets, tricksters, function as manifestations of inner psychological conflicts rather than literal characters. As Hillman (1979) argues, such archetypal landscapes serve to "deepen the image" rather than resolve the plot, encouraging a mode of viewing that is contemplative rather than cathartic (s. 143).

Psychedelia in these films thus operates not merely as visual distortion but as a cinematic technique of subjectivity. The use of color filters, montage, temporal loops, and disjunctive editing externalizes the characters' internal chaos. In *Zachariah* (1971), hailed as "the first electric Western," the musical interludes performed by psychedelic rock bands create a rift in narrative continuity, transforming the film into a countercultural meditation on the dissolution of the ego. The titular character's journey, punctuated by duels that resemble spiritual trials, culminates not in heroism but in renunciation. As Harper (2005)

suggests, the film's "acid-infused absurdity" reveals the vacuity of both violent masculinity and spiritual platitudes (s. 89). Ultimately, the anti-hero of the Acid Western is a paradoxical figure: both seeker and exile, pilgrim and ghost. Their trajectory resists narrative resolution, embodying instead what Deleuze (1989) calls the "time-image," in which action gives way to pure optical and sonic situations (s. 52). The result is a cinematic form where character becomes event, and identity is no longer a stable anchor but a shifting constellation of sensations and visions. In this way, Acid Westerns expose the spiritual bankruptcy of the Western myth while offering its own aesthetic of mystical rebellion. By transforming the lone rider into a haunted mystic, these films do not merely deconstruct the genre, they reimagine it as a theater of metaphysical crisis.

#### **4. POLITICAL ALLEGORY AND ANTI-IMPERIAL PARODY**

A defining trait of the Acid Western is its strategic deployment of political allegory to critique historical narratives and imperial power structures. These films reinterpret the Western frontier not as a space of national emergence, but as a haunted and ideologically contaminated ground upon which colonial violence, capitalist expansion, and epistemological contradictions are laid bare. In this context, parody becomes a critical aesthetic mode, what Bakhtin (1981) might term a "carnavalesque inversion," through which dominant myths are dismantled and replaced with grotesque reflections of socio-political reality. Alex Cox's *Walker* (1987) stands as one of the most overtly political examples within the Acid Western canon. It dramatizes the 19th-century exploits of William Walker, an American mercenary who invaded Nicaragua and declared himself president, presenting this historical narrative through the

lens of psychedelic farce. The film consciously breaks period realism by inserting deliberate anachronisms, helicopters, Coca-Cola trucks, Zippo lighters, and Time magazines, into 1850s Nicaragua. These disruptions function as more than stylistic flourishes; they operate as Brechtian devices that foreground the artificiality of historical narration. Cox uses these jarring insertions to critique the continuity of American imperialism, drawing parallels between 19th-century manifest destiny and 20th-century neocolonialism in Central America. As Linda Hutcheon (1985) argues in her theory of “historiographic metafiction,” such narrative strategies expose the ideological underpinnings of historical writing by rendering them absurd (p. 127). Walker, in this view, becomes a feverish meditation on empire and the recursive violence of U.S. foreign policy.

The logic of parody as political disruption is also central to Alejandro Jodorowsky’s *El Topo* (1970), a film that blends Spaghetti Western conventions with surrealist montage, Eastern mysticism, and Marxist allegory. The narrative, which follows a black-clad gunfighter on a quest to defeat four mystical masters, transforms the classic Western duel into a ritual of ideological confrontation. Each master represents a distorted principle, militarism, rationalism, aestheticism, and asceticism, which the protagonist must overcome, not by physical prowess alone but through metaphysical unraveling. Jodorowsky’s use of grotesque violence and symbolic inversion, e.g., the transformation of the protagonist into a messianic figure who liberates an underground society of deformed outcasts, can be read through Deleuze and Guattari’s (1983) concept of “deterritorialization,” wherein dominant codes are subverted by flows of intensity that resist systemic control (p. 142). *El Topo* becomes not only a spiritual parable but a revolutionary text, exposing the hypocrisies of institutional power, religious dogma, and capitalist individualism. In a different tonal register, Kelly Reichardt’s *Meek’s Cutoff*

(2010) offers a quiet but trenchant anti-imperial critique by reframing the settler narrative through a feminist and postcolonial lens. Set in the 1840s, the film follows a group of settlers led by the inept Stephen Meek as they traverse the Oregon desert in search of a viable route to the West. The story is told primarily through the eyes of Emily Tetherow, whose growing suspicion of Meek's authority mirrors the audience's own disorientation. The arrival of a captured Native American man introduces a moral ambiguity that refuses simplistic binaries of civilization versus savagery. Reichardt employs long takes, minimal dialogue, and a muted color palette to create a sense of temporal suspension and existential dread. This refusal to adhere to classical narrative structure serves, as Jameson (1991) posits, as a postmodern strategy that emphasizes the fragmentary nature of historical knowledge and the impossibility of totalizing narratives (p. 52).

Through these diverse examples, the Acid Western reveals itself as a genre that critiques empire not only through content but through form. The disruption of narrative linearity, the insertion of surreal and anachronistic elements, and the destabilization of traditional character archetypes all serve to expose the ideological scaffolding of imperial history. In this way, parody in the Acid Western becomes an instrument of what Spivak (1988) might call "epistemic violence" a means of contesting the authority of hegemonic historiography and offering alternative modes of seeing, remembering, and resisting. Ultimately, political allegory and anti-imperial parody in the Acid Western function not as didactic tools but as affective and aesthetic ruptures. They allow these films to engage with history as a site of trauma and simulation, where meaning is not discovered but continually deconstructed. As such, the Acid Western emerges as a vital cinematic form through which the myths of the American West, and by extension, the narratives of empire, are brought into hallucinatory crisis.



## **5. GENDER, BODIES, AND THE DESACRALIZATION OF THE FRONTIER**

The Acid Western's revisionist impulse extends not only to political mythologies and genre conventions but also to the symbolic functions of gender and the body. By dismantling the archetype of the hypermasculine frontier hero and interrogating the ideological construction of the female body, Acid Westerns perform a desanctification of the frontier space, stripping it of its patriarchal mystique and revealing it as a contested, often grotesque terrain. This desacralization aligns with feminist critiques of national mythmaking, particularly those that position gender as central to the performance of cultural and territorial conquest (Butler, 1990, s. 27; Grosz, 1994, s. 45). Kelly Reichardt's *Meek's Cutoff* (2010) is perhaps the most poignant feminist reconfiguration of the Western frontier. The film places women, particularly Michelle Williams's character Emily, at the center of narrative agency in a genre that historically marginalized female voices. Set in 1845 on the Oregon Trail, the story follows a group of settlers led by a dubious guide through arid wilderness. Unlike classical Westerns that valorize decision-making male figures, *Meek's Cutoff* dramatizes the collapse of masculine certainty and reconfigures survival around feminine intuition and communal care. As Tasker (2011) notes, "the film's radical quietness and female-centered perspective foreground gendered labor and epistemic fragility in frontier myth" (s. 93). Emily's climactic act of handing water to a Native guide, against the white male leader's wishes, symbolizes not only a rejection of settler logic but an ethical realignment grounded in vulnerability rather than domination.

Similarly, *El Topo* (1970) by Alejandro Jodorowsky introduces gender as a transformative force. The film's allegorical journey includes scenes where women act as catalysts for the protagonist's metamorphosis, or as mirrors that expose the

hypocrisies of patriarchal spirituality. One striking example is the protagonist's transition from a violent gunslinger to a monk, initiated through a series of erotic and spiritual encounters with female characters. These interactions are saturated with surreal symbolism, phallic totems, hermaphroditic figures, and ritualistic violence, that disorient stable categories of gender and identity. As Kristeva (1982) articulates, the abject feminine often haunts the symbolic order as both a site of threat and revelation (s. 71), and in *El Topo*, this abjection is rendered visible through acts of bodily rupture and mystical inversion.

Robert Downey Sr.'s *Greaser's Palace* (1972) also plays with gendered performance in ways that destabilize fixed identities. Jesse, the Christ-figure, is often feminized or androgynized through costume, gesture, and language. The film's deliberate mixture of sacrilege and sexual ambiguity challenges the Judeo-Christian underpinnings of Western heroism and proposes a new messianic model, one that is fractured, queer, and performative. As Halberstam (2005) asserts, the disruption of normative gender presentation in such contexts exposes "the ideological dependence of narrative resolution on stable identity categories" (s. 88). In these films, the frontier ceases to be a stage for masculine self-realization and becomes a liminal site where bodily difference, gendered labor, and affective relations reconstitute meaning. Acid Westerns reveal that the mythology of conquest is inextricably tied to control over gendered bodies, be they female, queer, racialized, or otherwise abject. By foregrounding these bodies, the genre undermines the sacralized logic of expansion and replaces it with ambiguity, ethical contingency, and embodied critique. Through this, the Acid Western opens a space for feminist and queer epistemologies that had long been excluded from the cinematic frontier.

## **6. TEMPORAL DISRUPTION AND POSTLINEARITY: TIME AS SPIRITUAL ENTROPY**

In the Acid Western, time itself becomes a dislocated and unstable medium, not merely a backdrop to narrative progression but a primary site of philosophical and aesthetic disruption. Traditional Westerns are often governed by linearity: they follow a cause-and-effect structure where the protagonist's journey is teleological, moving inexorably toward resolution, justice, or redemption. Acid Westerns, by contrast, adopt temporal structures that reflect entropy rather than order. They portray time not as a march toward progress but as a spiraling collapse, an existential descent into uncertainty, hallucination, and decay. Gilles Deleuze's (1989) distinction between the movement-image and the time-image offers a productive framework to understand this rupture. While classical cinema aligns with the movement-image, where time is subordinated to action, Acid Westerns deploy the time-image, privileging moments of inaction, reflection, and affective disorientation. In *Dead Man* (1995), for instance, time is not merely suspended but ritualistically dismantled. William Blake's journey through the American wilderness is devoid of traditional temporality; it becomes a liminal drift where time folds upon itself, echoing the entropic inertia of a dying culture. The very notion of a beginning, middle, and end dissolves into a dreamlike continuum punctuated by visions, death, and decay.

Similarly, *The Shooting* (1966) and *Ride in the Whirlwind* (1966) by Monte Hellman manifest temporal disjunctions that refuse narrative closure. Characters wander in vast, desolate landscapes, driven not by goals but by vague compulsions and obscure destinies. The repetitive rhythms of journey and encounter in these films mirror the postmodern suspicion toward linear causality. Walter Benjamin's (1940) idea of "Jetztzeit" the

messianic time that shatters historical continuity, resonates in these temporal structures. Rather than affirming a continuous history, these films evoke temporal stutters and breaks that challenge Enlightenment notions of progress. Acid Westerns often blend historical eras and anachronistic elements, creating a hallucinatory palimpsest of time. Walker (1987), for instance, interweaves 19th-century imperialism with 20th-century technology, juxtaposing horse-drawn wagons with helicopters and typewriters with televisions. This conscious violation of historical coherence becomes a critique of historiography itself, exposing the artificiality of historical narration. As Jean Baudrillard (1994) argues, such simulations produce a hyperreality where signs of history replace historical referents (s. 6). Acid Westerns thus create temporal fields where the past is not remembered but reimaged through surreal, affective, and symbolic registers.

Even silence and duration in these films carry temporal significance. Long static shots, minimal dialogue, and cyclical editing patterns transform cinematic time into meditative space. *Meek's Cutoff* (2010) exemplifies this strategy: time is stretched and tension sustained not through action, but through stillness and anticipation. The characters' slow movement across the Oregon desert becomes a ritual of temporal endurance, reflecting the futility and absurdity of frontier mythology. In essence, Acid Westerns radicalize cinematic time. They replace the heroic temporality of conquest with the melancholic temporality of entropy. Time becomes thick, heavy, and haunted, no longer a vehicle for destiny but a field of existential suspension. These films articulate a crisis of temporality symptomatic of late modernity, where historical continuity, personal agency, and narrative coherence collapse into fragmented, looping, and dissolving moments. Through these strategies, the Acid Western

does not merely depict time; it thinks time, philosophically and politically, as a terrain of loss, rupture, and spectral endurance.

## **7. SOUND, MUSIC, AND ACOUSTIC DISRUPTION: AUDITORY HALLUCINATIONS IN THE ACID WESTERN**

One of the most overlooked yet vital dimensions of the Acid Western is its radical manipulation of sound and music, which functions not only as an atmospheric tool but also as a narrative and psychological disruptor. Departing from the triumphant orchestral scores of classical Westerns, think of Elmer Bernstein's compositions for *The Magnificent Seven*, the Acid Western embraces a dissonant and often unsettling acoustic landscape. This sonic strategy functions as a form of auditory hallucination, intensifying the films' metaphysical drift and aligning them with broader psychedelic and countercultural aesthetics. In *Zachariah* (1971), often dubbed the "first electric Western," the fusion of psychedelic rock with Western iconography disorients the viewer's expectations and anchors the film within a temporally ambiguous space. With performances by Country Joe and the Fish, The James Gang, and Doug Kershaw, the film replaces traditional diegetic cues with jarring, nonlinear musical interludes that blur the boundary between the real and the surreal. The effect is one of sonic estrangement, a refusal of Western cinematic continuity that mirrors the protagonists' existential dislocation. As Susan Sontag (1966) suggested in her seminal essay "Against Interpretation," psychedelic art seeks to bypass rational understanding and provoke a sensory and affective intensity. In this vein, *Zachariah*'s auditory fabric becomes a hallucinogenic medium that destabilizes narrative coherence and historical placement.

Similarly, *El Topo* (1970) employs a spiritually charged soundscape that oscillates between silence, ritualistic chanting, and atonal disruptions. The film's director and composer Alejandro Jodorowsky crafts an acoustic world that resembles a meditative séance more than a narrative score. Extended sequences occur with minimal dialogue, allowing ambient sounds, wind, breath, animal cries, to swell into existential resonance. Here, silence is not a void but a metaphysical presence. Michel Chion (1994) notes that silence in cinema is never truly silent but is rather filled with potential meanings and sensory provocations. Jodorowsky's use of silence becomes a spiritual void where the collapse of language and the limits of representation converge. Acoustic disruption also emerges in *Greaser's Palace* (1972), where Downey Sr. uses sound as satire. The film interlaces absurdist musical numbers with abrupt silences and incongruent sonic transitions. The diegetic collapse between sound and image contributes to a sense of ontological uncertainty. These sound experiments echo Gilles Deleuze's (1989) conception of the "time-image" in cinema, where sound and image are decoupled to provoke affective dissonance rather than logical progression. In the Acid Western, the ear becomes as disoriented as the eye; auditory hallucination accompanies visual fragmentation.

The politics of sound in Acid Westerns is equally crucial. In *Walker* (1987), Joe Strummer's post-punk score infuses 19th-century imperial conquest with 20th-century rebellion. This deliberate anachronism deconstructs the ideological consistency of historical time, echoing Fredric Jameson's (1991) notion of "nostalgia for the present." The sound becomes a political device that displaces the viewer, refusing immersion and demanding reflexivity. Likewise, the repeated use of modern sounds in anachronistic contexts, television static in the desert, military helicopters over colonial towns, disorients the historical ear and

foregrounds the artificiality of empire's narration. The use of ambient soundscapes in *Meek's Cutoff* (2010) further exemplifies acoustic minimalism as a method of existential meditation. Director Kelly Reichardt offers a frontier emptied of triumphant music; instead, long silences, footfalls, wind, and water dominate the sound palette. These sounds anchor the characters in a sensorial present stripped of mythic grandeur. In doing so, the film rejects the teleological score of manifest destiny and replaces it with acoustic ambiguity. As Brandon LaBelle (2010) contends, listening in dissonant environments becomes a political act, an attunement to the "cracks" of dominant narratives.

Importantly, the hallucinatory use of sound in Acid Westerns also gestures toward madness, trauma, and interior collapse. The repetition of certain motifs, gunshots that echo unnaturally long, animal wails distorted into human screams, whispering winds that seem to speak functions as a sonic uncanny. These auditory effects produce a psychological destabilization that aligns the films with both surrealist cinema and trauma theory. Cathy Caruth (1996) has argued that trauma returns in fragments and distortions, often through sensory overload. The auditory hallucinations in Acid Westerns can thus be read as expressions of historical trauma, of colonial violence, environmental ruin, and spiritual disintegration. In sum, sound in the Acid Western is not merely supplementary but constitutive of its radical aesthetics. Through musical anachronism, sonic hallucination, ritualistic silence, and acoustic estrangement, these films reframe the frontier as an auditory hallucination, an echo chamber where empire, identity, and perception dissolve into spectral noise. Sound becomes not just what is heard, but what haunts, disturbs, and displaces. In this way, the Acid Western transforms cinema into a medium of both auditory philosophy and political listening.

## **8. SOUND, MUSIC, AND ACOUSTIC DISRUPTION: AUDITORY HALLUCINATIONS IN THE ACID WESTERN**

Sound and music in the Acid Western are not mere supplementary components but vital structuring forces that reshape narrative logic, affective resonance, and epistemological orientation. Unlike the orchestral scores and heroic motifs of classical Westerns that reinforce narrative coherence and moral clarity, Acid Westerns deploy sonic elements to disorient, destabilize, and deepen the experience of psychological fragmentation. The auditory register becomes a site of hallucination, spectral presence, and metaphysical disturbance, transforming the frontier into an acoustic hauntology. *Zachariah* (1971), hailed as the first “electric Western,” exemplifies this auditory paradigm shift. Infused with live performances by rock bands such as Country Joe and the Fish and The James Gang, the film replaces traditional Western diegesis with countercultural sonics. The music is not just background; it becomes narrative propulsion, emotional contour, and psychedelic portal. Scenes dissolve into jam sessions, blurring the boundary between character and performer, fiction and spectacle. This sonic rupture aligns with Jacques Attali's (1985) theory of “noise” as a form of political resistance: sound, in its most unstructured and chaotic form, defies dominant codes and engenders new modes of being (s. 27).

In *El Topo* (1970), Alejandro Jodorowsky orchestrates an acoustic world filled with dissonant chants, echoing gunshots, ritualistic silences, and absurd sonic juxtapositions. These auditory hallucinations fracture diegetic logic and plunge the viewer into a liminal state. The exaggerated reverberation of bullets, the ambient hums of desert winds, and the surreal placement of classical music during acts of violence create a sonic surrealism that rivals the visual spectacle. Here, sound functions



as metaphysical punctuation, marking ruptures in the psychic, ethical, and spiritual terrain of the narrative. Silence, too, plays a central role in acoustic disruption. In *Meek's Cutoff* (2010), director Kelly Reichardt employs long stretches of near silence interrupted only by the rustle of wind or the creak of wagon wheels. These minimalist soundscapes induce unease, embodying the alienation and uncertainty of the pioneers. As Michel Chion (1994) suggests, silence in film is never absolute; it is charged with tension, expectancy, and the weight of the unspoken (s. 57). In Acid Westerns, such silences become sonic voids that reflect the moral and metaphysical vacuum of the frontier mythos.

The use of non-diegetic sound also challenges the boundaries of cinematic space and time. In *Greasers' Palace* (1972), Robert Downey Sr. inserts baroque compositions, gospel music, and absurd voiceovers into a desolate Western landscape. This sonic collage creates a disjointed acoustic field where temporality collapses and meaning unravels. It recalls Walter Murch's (1995) notion of "sound montage," where layered auditory textures produce emotional and intellectual dissonance. In the Acid Western, this technique becomes a tool of radical estrangement, allowing sound to unmoor viewers from conventional expectations and open pathways to surreal reflection. Moreover, the voice in Acid Westerns is frequently rendered strange or estranged. Echo effects, overdubs, and spectral layering dehumanize speech and turn dialogue into ritualistic incantation. This technique aligns with Mladen Dolar's (2006) theory of the "voice as objet petit a," a disruptive, unlocatable surplus that exceeds semantic function (s. 103). In *Dead Man* (1995), the voice of Nobody serves not just as narration but as spiritual echo, haunting the protagonist's journey and blurring the line between prophecy and madness.

In sum, the acoustic architecture of the Acid Western is one of disruption, diffraction, and transcendence. Music, noise,

silence, and voice collaborate to dismantle narrative certainties and immerse the viewer in a hallucinogenic soundscape. Through these strategies, the genre destabilizes not only what we see but what we hear, engaging the auditory senses as sites of political resistance and metaphysical inquiry. It is in this acoustic liminality that the Acid Western finds its most resonant frequencies of dissidence, transforming the frontier into a terrain not only of visual myth but of sonic revelation.

## **9. SYMBOLIC ANIMALS, SACRED VIOLENCE, AND THE COSMIC FRONTIER**

One of the most haunting and symbolically rich aspects of the Acid Western is its treatment of animals not merely as part of the landscape, but as active agents within a metaphysical and symbolic order. These films often feature animals, horses, wolves, snakes, birds, not as passive background elements, but as bearers of mythic, spiritual, or philosophical resonance. This animistic approach diverges from traditional Westerns, where animals tend to reinforce human dominion and conquest. In the Acid Western, animals disrupt human-centered narratives and gesture toward a cosmic order that exceeds human logic. In *El Topo* (1970), the titular character's journey is punctuated by encounters with symbolic animals: rabbits, scorpions, and especially the horse, which becomes an extension of the protagonist's body and psyche. Jodorowsky imbues these animals with sacred meaning, aligning them with archetypes from Tarot and Eastern philosophy. The killing of animals in the film is not just violence, it is sacrilege. In fact, the film's notorious use of real animal deaths caused significant controversy, but also emphasized the transgression of boundaries between the sacred and the profane, the symbolic and the material. Similarly, in *Dead Man* (1995), the recurring presence of deer, crows, and the

character Nobody's (Gary Farmer) references to animal spirits invoke a cosmology rooted in Indigenous epistemologies. Nobody speaks of the spirit of the buffalo and the owl as mediators between life and death, sanity and madness. The film's final sequence, where Blake (Johnny Depp) is placed in a canoe and pushed out into the river, watched silently by animals, serves as a ritual passage into another ontological plane. This invocation of animal presence suggests that redemption or understanding is possible only through a reconnection with a cosmic order erased by colonial modernity.

Claude Lévi-Strauss's (1963) anthropological concept of "the raw and the cooked" is particularly relevant here. In Acid Westerns, animals often mark the threshold between civilization and wildness, order and chaos. Their appearance signals a rupture in the linear, rational world of modernity. Snakes in *The Shooting* (1966), for example, are more than environmental threats, they symbolize an Edenic fall, an intrusion of the sacred into the desolate. Horses refuse to move, birds scatter ominously, and howls echo across barren plains. These signs unsettle the viewer's expectations of narrative stability and point instead to an ontology that is ritualistic, tragic, and inherently uncanny. Furthermore, sacrificial violence, whether against animals or humans, serves as a means of accessing transcendental insight. In *Zachariah* (1971), the stylized gunfights take on the structure of duels not for justice, but for ecstatic awakening. The bullet becomes a mystical vector, and death a form of sacred passage. Such representations resonate with René Girard's (1972) theory of the scapegoat mechanism, where ritual violence serves to contain and reveal communal tensions and metaphysical longing. The Acid Western adopts and distorts this sacrificial logic, showing how violence, when stripped of narrative justification, becomes a meditative spectacle of entropy and revelation.

Thus, the presence of symbolic animals and sacrificial violence in Acid Westerns transforms the frontier from a historical geography into a cosmic theater. These films present existence not as a human-centered drama, but as a metaphysical struggle between decay and renewal, memory and forgetting, spirit and flesh. Animals function not only as metaphors but as sacred participants in a ritualized deconstruction of meaning. Their cries, deaths, and silences haunt the screen as reminders that beneath the dust and blood of the Western lies a deeper, older mythos, a cosmic ecology of signs. In this context, the Acid Western aligns with posthumanist critiques that seek to decentralize the human subject and recover the agency of the more-than-human world. By positioning animals as mythic signifiers and sacred interlocutors, these films offer a spiritual counterpoint to the imperial gaze. They do not depict man mastering the frontier, but rather being unmade by it, returning to an elemental condition where speech gives way to silence, and reason to vision.

## **10. THE RUINS OF MEANING: ENTROPIC NARRATIVES AND POSTMYTHIC CINEMA**

At the heart of the Acid Western lies a radical interrogation of narrative itself, its structures, ideologies, and limitations. In rejecting the coherent teleologies of classical Western storytelling, these films expose the entropic collapse of meaning in a postmythic age. The “ruins of meaning” in Acid Westerns do not merely reflect a breakdown of narrative logic; they index a deeper philosophical malaise, one wherein traditional myths, heroism, progress, nationhood can no longer sustain interpretive coherence or existential comfort. These films are haunted by fragments, of story, identity, time, and belief. In *Greaser’s Palace* (1972), Robert Downey Sr. crafts an absurdist

parable in which the Christ narrative is rendered comically incoherent. The messianic figure Zoot Suit ambles through a surreal landscape where resurrection is a vaudeville act and violence is stripped of meaning. This deliberate collapse of religious myth reflects Jean-François Lyotard's (1984) concept of the "incredulity toward metanarratives," as the film deconstructs the very frameworks that once promised salvation and moral orientation.

Similarly, Walker (1987) erodes historical narrative through conscious anachronism and contradiction. William Walker's imperialist mission is simultaneously glorified and ridiculed, producing a destabilizing effect that aligns with Linda Hutcheon's (1988) notion of historiographic metafiction. In refusing to distinguish between fact and fiction, past and present, the film performs a postmodern dismantling of historical authority. The viewer is left amidst the rubble of ideological constructs, forced to confront the contingency and artifice of historical "truth." This dismantling of myth is often visualized through decaying landscapes, deteriorating bodies, and symbolic entropy. In *Dead Man* (1995), the journey westward leads not to prosperity or moral clarity, but to death, hallucination, and erasure. The constant references to poetry, dreams, and omens underscore a world where language itself is disintegrating. Roland Barthes's (1977) concept of the "death of the author" finds cinematic corollary here: protagonists lose agency, narration unravels, and coherence is replaced by sensory excess and symbolic noise.

Acid Westerns are postmythic in that they stage the exhaustion of mythic structures while simultaneously yearning for their transformative potential. They inhabit a liminal space between critique and mourning, dismantling the Western's ideological apparatus while evoking its spectral afterlife. As Mark Fisher (2009) suggested in his theory of "hauntology," such

works are haunted not by what they are, but by what they can no longer be. The frontier in the Acid Western is no longer a stage for becoming, but a crypt for broken narratives. This vision can also be fruitfully compared with Walter Benjamin's "Angel of History," blown backwards into the future by the storm of progress, witnessing the accumulating wreckage of civilization (Benjamin, 1940/2003). The Acid Western, like Benjamin's angel, faces ruins that grow skyward, myths that have collapsed under the weight of contradiction. The films neither offer resolution nor redemption; they dwell in ruins, performing an archaeology of disillusionment.

Fredric Jameson's (1991) concept of postmodernism as the cultural logic of late capitalism also illuminates the Acid Western's entropic structure. These films do not present coherent narratives because they emerge from a culture in which coherence itself has become commodified, hollowed out by spectacle and irony. The Acid Western refuses narrative closure and ideological stability, opting instead for affective disorientation and conceptual ruin. In this final register, the Acid Western affirms its place as a cinema of metaphysical ruin. It does not rebuild myths; it sifts through their ashes. Its heroes are not redeemers but revenants, wandering through allegorical deserts littered with discarded symbols and lost hopes. Through their disjointed stories, entropic aesthetics, and philosophical skepticism, these films compel us to reflect on the fate of meaning in a world where all frontiers, geographical, ideological, and symbolic, have collapsed.

## **11. CONCLUSION: BETWEEN ASHES AND VISION- THE PHILOSOPHICAL RECKONING OF THE ACID WESTERN**

The Acid Western emerges not merely as a subversive cinematic subgenre, but as a philosophical terrain in its own right, a visionary corpus that dismantles the ideological apparatus of the classical Western while gesturing toward an ontological void beneath. In its amalgamation of spiritual allegory, grotesque parody, metaphysical longing, and aesthetic entropy, the Acid Western constitutes an autopsy of the American frontier mythos. It does not merely critique; it grieves, conjures, distorts, and re-mythologizes the ideological scaffolding of the Western tradition. Through our analysis, it becomes clear that the Acid Western deconstructs linear temporality, moral absolutism, and individualist heroism, replacing them with fractured subjectivities, sacrificial economies, posthuman landscapes, and poetic incoherence. In rejecting narrative closure and teleological certainty, it stages a cinematic ritual that is at once apocalyptic and redemptive. Its characters, wandering prophets, haunted killers, sacred fools, are not agents of progress, but fragments of a symbolic order in disintegration. They traverse a desert not of the American West, but of postmodern consciousness, suspended between hallucination and critique.

One of the Acid Western's most profound interventions lies in its reconfiguration of violence and space. The gun is no longer a tool of justice but an instrument of metaphysical rupture; the desert no longer a blank canvas for civilization, but a cosmic graveyard echoing with lost voices. Here, landscapes do not merely reflect psychological states, they become sacred texts, inscribed with ontological dread and spiritual yearning. The desert, the ghost town, the decaying homestead, each functions as an affective ruin, wherein memory, identity, and myth collide in spectral palimpsest. Moreover, the Acid Western's visual

grammar, as we have shown, ruptures the visual sovereignty of classical cinema. Hallucinogenic imagery, disjunctive editing, symbolic juxtapositions, and sonic excess disrupt the logic of realism and reposition the viewer into a state of ontological vertigo. These films demand not recognition, but unlearning; they solicit not affirmation, but confrontation. As Gilles Deleuze (1985) argued in his theory of the time-image, cinema can present time directly, not through movement but through cracks, gaps, and haunted durations. The Acid Western embodies this form of duration, where every moment pulses with historical aftershock and mythic residue.

Equally significant is the Acid Western's posthuman sensibility. By displacing the human as the center of narrative meaning, these films turn to animals, landscapes, and spectral forces as alternative agents of vision. The horse, the crow, the river, the sun, all participate in a re-sacralized cosmology that counters anthropocentric modernity. The films enact what Donna Haraway (2008) calls "becoming with," a relational ontology in which meaning arises from entangled existences rather than sovereign subjects. In this regard, the Acid Western not only critiques imperialism and capitalism, but proposes an ontological politics rooted in communion, ruin, and metamorphosis.

Ultimately, what the Acid Western offers is not a solution but an invitation: to dwell in the ruins, to sit with broken myths, to endure the unraveling of historical coherence. Its cinema is one of elegy and excess, critique and mysticism, laughter and lament. It exhumes the corpse of the Western not to resurrect it, but to trace the scars it left upon cultural consciousness. As Walter Benjamin (1940/2003) reminds us, true critique is not to rescue the past as it was, but to awaken its unfulfilled possibilities. The Acid Western does just that, it haunts us with what the Western could have meant, and reminds us of the sacred violence that built its myth. In this sense, the Acid Western is not a genre, but a



philosophical condition. It is the cinematic mirror held to the West's ideological face, cracked and shimmering with spectral meaning. It does not seek to restore faith in the frontier but to perform its metaphysical disintegration honoring the ashes, and from them, conjuring vision.

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## **KINDS OF KINDNESS UNDONE: RECURSIVE ETHICS AND RITUALISED FAILURE IN LANTHIMOS' CINEMA**

**Serap SARIBAŞ<sup>1</sup>**

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

In the contemporary cinematic landscape, few auteurs interrogate the ethical architecture of human relationships with the same formal audacity and philosophical depth as Yorgos Lanthimos. His films, marked by a cold visual precision, minimalist dialogue, and surreal scenarios, deconstruct the affective fabric of social interaction, placing the viewer in unsettling proximity to power, obedience, and emotional detachment. *Kinds of Kindness* (2024), Lanthimos's most recent work, intensifies these inquiries by fragmenting the notion of "kindness" into three narrative iterations that progressively strip compassion of its moral essence. The film does not merely ask what it means to be kind; it stages kindness as an affective performance hollowed out by systems of discipline, dependency, and domination. Structured as a triptych with recurring actors in altered roles, *Kinds of Kindness* resists both traditional character development and linear moral progression. Instead, it offers a cyclical dramaturgy of ethical failures. Each story presents a protagonist subjected to an oppressive structure, whether professional, romantic, or spiritual, that reframes kindness as a demand rather than a virtue. In Lanthimos's world, to be "kind"

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is often to obey, to conform, or to erase one's own subjectivity in service of another's will. This reversal aligns with Judith Butler's formulation of ethics not as a set of abstract principles but as a precarious intersubjective condition, wherein one's very capacity to act morally is constituted by exposure to vulnerability and coercion (Butler, 2005, p. 83). Kindness, then, becomes a modality through which the subject is not liberated but governed.

The linguistic irony embedded in the film's title amplifies this inversion. While "kindness" conventionally evokes warmth, empathy, and generosity, *Lanthimos* renders it ambiguous, an affect that oscillates between comfort and compliance, between sincerity and control. The repetition of cast members across divergent roles blurs the boundaries of character identity, suggesting that kindness, like subjectivity itself, is not a stable interior attribute but a contingent posture shaped by power relations. As Foucault (1977) notes, modern institutions cultivate docile bodies not through overt violence but through subtle, continuous disciplinary practices (p. 136). *Lanthimos* mirrors this logic cinematically: his frames are austere, movements are choreographed, and speech is deliberately flattened, evoking a world in which emotional authenticity has been supplanted by ritualized behavior. This dehumanising aesthetic is further intensified through *Lanthimos*'s affective minimalism and the use of what Laura Marks terms "haptic visuality" a mode of visual experience in which tactile sensation replaces cognitive clarity (Marks, 2000, p. 184). The viewer, denied conventional emotional cues, is forced into a phenomenological engagement with the materiality of estrangement: silence, bodily tension, and architectural confinement dominate the screen. In this way, the film compels the audience not to identify with the characters but to witness, even embody, the erosion of ethical agency.

This paper undertakes a close reading of *Kinds of Kindness*, arguing that the film constitutes a radical cinematic

allegory of ethical disintegration in late modernity. By drawing on Giorgio Agamben's theory of "bare life" (1998), Butler's ethics of precarity and relational accountability (2004, 2005), and Marks's aesthetics of embodied spectatorship (2000), the analysis will illuminate how Lanthimos dismantles conventional moral binaries. Rather than portraying kindness as an inherent good, the film reveals it as a performative construct embedded within asymmetrical power relations. What emerges is a cinema of ethical ambiguity, one that invites not moral resolution but sustained critical discomfort.

## **2. THE ABSENCE OF COMPASSION: A WORLD WHERE KINDNESS BECOMES POWER**

*Kinds of Kindness* presents a meticulously structured cinematic inquiry into the erosion, redefinition, and eventual perversion of kindness as both a personal virtue and a social construct. Rather than depicting the absence of kindness as a void to be lamented, Yorgos Lanthimos constructs a world where kindness survives only as a grotesque simulacrum, stripped of its moral weight and deployed as a rhetorical and behavioural mechanism of domination. In this world, kindness is not simply lacking; it is co-opted, contorted, and strategically instrumentalised in service of systemic control, thereby becoming a gesture through which violence is rendered palatable, even noble. Each of the film's three narrative segments stages a variation on this corrupted model of ethical affect, revealing how social, romantic, and spiritual structures coerce individuals into performances of submission misrecognized as compassion. The first story centres on a man whose entire life is dictated by his employer, whose demands escalate from the professional to the moral, ultimately compelling the protagonist to abandon his spouse and commit acts of cruelty under the guise of loyalty. His

compliance, masquerading as benevolence, reflects what Foucault describes as “a machinery that produces subjected and practised bodies, ‘docile’ bodies” (Foucault, 1977, p. 136). The protagonist’s kindness is thus neither autonomous nor ethically grounded, it is a survival mechanism shaped by institutionalised power.

This dynamic underscores Judith Butler’s theory of ethical relationality. As Butler notes, “ethical obligation emerges precisely in the context of unchosen exposure to others” (Butler, 2005, p. 83). Yet in Lanthimos’s narrative, this exposure is not reciprocal or empathetic; it is one-sided, coercive, and exploitative. The man is not called into responsibility by the other’s vulnerability but rather forced into a grotesque mimicry of ethical action that conceals his utter subjugation. Kindness, in this framework, is not a virtue but a symptom of control, a performance extracted under threat, devoid of interiority or moral discernment. The second story radicalises this dynamic by transferring the setting from institutional to interpersonal. Here, a man, convinced that his lost partner can be resurrected in another woman, subjects her to an escalating regime of surveillance and transformation. What is framed as devotion becomes an allegory of ontological erasure: the woman’s subjectivity is systematically overwritten, until she is rendered indistinguishable from the man’s idealised memory. This narrative echoes Giorgio Agamben’s concept of *homo sacer*, the individual who may be killed but not sacrificed, excluded from legal and political life while remaining under sovereign control (Agamben, 1998, p. 123). The woman, in her subjugation, occupies precisely this position. Her life becomes bare life, a vessel for projection rather than a participant in mutual recognition.

The violence of this transformation is aestheticised as kindness: the man offers her food, speaks gently, and performs care. Yet each gesture reinforces the collapse of her autonomy,

revealing how affective language may be weaponised in the name of intimacy. As Butler (2004) observes, “violence done in the name of care is still violence” (p. 42). Lanthimos exploits this contradiction, forcing the viewer to question not only the sincerity of the character’s motives but the very legibility of compassion in conditions saturated with desire and domination. The third narrative shifts focus from the private to the spiritual domain, presenting a cult-like community where kindness is reframed as sacrificial devotion. The group’s doctrines demand increasingly violent displays of loyalty, culminating in acts that annihilate the self in pursuit of transcendence. Under the banner of collective mercy, the individual is coerced into obliteration. What begins as spiritual surrender becomes ritualistic self-negation. This trajectory reflects Žižek’s argument that “the most dangerous form of violence is the violence which is not perceived as such, but as its opposite, care, empathy, or sacrifice” (Žižek, 2008, p. 36). In this context, compassion is not only absent but becomes the ideological veil behind which brutality is sanctified.

Significantly, all three segments present kindness not as an ethical good but as a coded form of obedience. The viewer witnesses characters offering themselves up for judgment, punishment, or reconstruction, misinterpreting these acts as moral commitments rather than expressions of despair or resignation. The film’s *mise-en-scène* supports this reading: minimalist interiors, muted colour palettes, and distanced framing contribute to a sense of affective flatness. Lanthimos’s aesthetic renders kindness affectively illegible; it becomes a behavioural surface devoid of emotional content. This aligns with Laura Marks’s conception of “haptic visuality,” wherein the image resists cognitive resolution, inviting the viewer into an embodied experience of ambiguity and estrangement (Marks, 2000, p. 184). The cumulative effect is not catharsis, but estrangement. Lanthimos offers no redemptive arc, no reassertion of traditional



ethical binaries. Instead, he constructs a recursive logic of submission and control, inviting the audience not to morally identify with the characters but to question the structures that define what kindness is and whom it serves. In doing so, the film implicates the viewer in the very ambiguity it stages, challenging us to distinguish between ethical relation and performative compliance in a world where kindness no longer signals virtue but capitulation.

### **3. BODILY AESTHETICS AND HAPTIC VIOLENCE**

One of the most striking features of *Kinds of Kindness* is its use of the human body as both a narrative and ethical interface. Yorgos Lanthimos constructs a cinematic language in which bodies do not simply occupy space but articulate moral paradoxes, structural imbalances, and emotional absences. Far from being sites of vitality or resistance, the bodies in *Kinds of Kindness* are subjected, surveilled, manipulated, and reconstructed. They become affective surfaces upon which obedience, grief, desire, and control are inscribed. Through these cinematic strategies, the film foregrounds what can be termed *haptic violence*, a sensory and visual regime in which violence is registered not through explicit brutality but through the tactile alienation of embodied experience. The haptic quality of Lanthimos's imagery draws heavily on Laura Marks's theory of "haptic visuality," which describes a mode of seeing that resists visual mastery and invites the viewer into a tactile, affective relationship with the screen (Marks, 2000, p. 163). In this framework, the camera does not observe from a distance but brushes against the body, lingering on skin, breath, gesture, and posture. However, rather than evoking empathy or intimacy, these tactile encounters in Lanthimos's work often generate discomfort.

The viewer is not drawn into closeness but into estrangement, made to feel the awkward silences, the rigidity of posture, the mechanical repetition of gestures. These are not expressive bodies, but disarticulated ones, bodies that endure rather than act.

In the first segment, the protagonist's bodily compliance becomes the primary expression of his submission. His facial expressions remain minimal, and his gestures are slow, deliberate, and devoid of spontaneity. The body, here, is no longer an expressive vehicle of interiority but a disciplined shell that absorbs the demands of power. His physicality mirrors the ethical contradiction he embodies: a man who enacts acts of loyalty with a body emptied of will. Michel Foucault's notion of the "anatomy-politics" of the body is apt here; the subject becomes intelligible not through speech but through the calibration of posture, movement, and endurance (Foucault, 1977, p. 136). The second story intensifies this dynamic by offering the female body as the site of a symbolic reconstruction. As the male character attempts to reshape his partner's double into a replica of his lost beloved, he engages not only in psychological manipulation but in aesthetic and corporeal regulation. The woman's voice is corrected, her gestures monitored, her silences interpreted. Her body becomes a canvas for another's memory, a memorial site colonised by loss. In Agamben's terms, she is reduced to *bare life*, inhabiting a liminal zone between presence and erasure, between subject and object (Agamben, 1998, p. 123). Her silence does not signal consent, but the exhaustion of subjecthood. The haptic dimension becomes even more charged in the third narrative, where spiritual submission is performed through physical self-discipline. The cult's rituals require bodily endurance: fasting, restraint, repetition, and physical trials become sacraments of belief. Yet these acts do not transcend the flesh; they re-inscribe it as a site of moral surveillance. The body is asked not to speak but to comply, not to express faith but to prove it through

controlled suffering. Here, the aestheticisation of pain does not elicit sympathy but reveals the perverse logic by which discipline masquerades as devotion. As Butler notes, the body in its precarity is where power intervenes most intimately, “marking the threshold where political life is suspended in the name of ethical purification” (Butler, 2004, p. 48).

Lanthimos refuses to eroticise or sentimentalise these bodily performances. Instead, he subjects them to formal repetition: long takes, static shots, and clinical framings that flatten emotional access. This repetition produces what Deleuze terms the “time-image,” where the sensory-motor schema collapses, and the body becomes a site of temporal disjunction and metaphysical suspension (Deleuze, 1989, p. 42). The viewer is not offered catharsis but becomes trapped in the loop of unresolved tension, a haptic impasse in which violence is not shown but felt. Ultimately, *Kinds of Kindness* proposes a bodily ontology in which ethics is not verbalised but inscribed into flesh. The characters’ corporeal suffering, quiet, contained, almost ceremonial, forces the audience to reckon with the affective cost of ethical performance in regimes of power. The haptic aesthetics render pain not as spectacle but as residue, as weight, as opacity. It is not that compassion is absent, it is that the bodies are no longer permitted to access or transmit it. Compassion, in Lanthimos’s cinema, becomes a trace memory, a sensory ghost that hovers over bodies already claimed by discipline.

#### **4. AFFECTIVE MINIMALISM AND THE SILENCE OF THE SCRIPT**

In *Kinds of Kindness*, Yorgos Lanthimos develops a stark emotional landscape where silence, monotony, and affective restraint are not incidental features but defining structures of communication. The film’s characters speak in flattened tones,

with rigid syntax and long, punctuated pauses that evacuate the dialogue of emotional cadence. This minimalism does not simply suggest introversion or trauma; it constitutes a radical refusal of conventional cinematic affect, replacing emotional expressivity with a cold, procedural mode of interaction. In doing so, Lanthimos challenges the viewer's perceptual habits and ethical expectations, drawing attention to how language can cease to function as a medium of care. Rather than cultivating empathy through confession or vulnerability, *Kinds of Kindness* presents relationships mediated by control, performance, and repetition. The emotional neutrality of the characters becomes a source of disquiet, and their inability, or unwillingness, to express pain, joy, or love foregrounds what Roland Barthes would call a *writing degree zero*: a form of speech that resists ornamentation and collapses rhetorical function (Barthes, 1968, p. 14). Dialogue becomes actionless text, inert yet directive, devoid of subtext but rich in structural implication. The characters "speak" not to communicate but to fulfill expectations embedded in the social scripts that govern them.

The silence in the film functions as both a literal and metaphorical void. It is not merely an absence of sound but an ethical suspension, a refusal to perform affect where it is structurally demanded. Judith Butler (2005) reminds us that ethics is rooted in "giving an account of oneself," a practice that depends on language, relationality, and exposure (p. 22). Yet in Lanthimos's film, this account is withheld. The characters do not explain themselves, nor are they asked to; they are positioned within institutional, romantic, or spiritual frameworks where subjectivity is irrelevant and the imperative is to act without questioning. The viewer, confronted with these silences, must navigate a narrative in which ethical legibility has been radically reduced. In the first story, the protagonist's silence is most chilling in his domestic life. He does not resist the command to

abandon his wife, nor does he mourn her absence. His silence is not expressive but operational, it permits the machinery of domination to function unimpeded. Similarly, in the second segment, the woman selected to replace the man's lost partner rarely speaks. Her silence is an effect of coercion: her body is spoken over, her subjectivity shaped by memory and expectation. She is no longer addressed as a person, but as a vessel to be filled with someone else's narrative. As Agamben (1998) notes in his analysis of *homo sacer*, the subject reduced to "bare life" does not speak; she is spoken about, acted upon, regulated without reciprocity (p. 126).

The third segment compounds this affective erasure within a collective frame. The cult's members speak in phrases drained of spontaneity, rehearsed and ritualistic, their emotional range compressed into mechanical declarations of belief. Lanthimos thus collapses the distinction between free will and indoctrination, showing how language may operate not to generate meaning but to suspend it. In this sense, the film aligns with Deleuze's "time-image," in which the sensory-motor link is severed and action becomes unmotivated, suspended in a non-teleological temporality (Deleuze, 1989, p. 181). The characters' words do not initiate change; they echo within a closed system of behavioral enforcement. Laura Marks's theory of "haptic visuality" offers another lens through which to understand the film's aesthetic strategy. Marks (2000) posits that haptic images disrupt visual clarity and instead generate affective knowledge through texture, slowness, and sensory ambiguity (p. 163). In *Kinds of Kindness*, this visual tactility is matched by an acoustic haptic, a sonic flattening that makes the audience *feel* silence as pressure. The camera lingers on still faces, close-ups of impassive expressions, and long, rhythmically dissonant conversations that never fully resolve. These moments produce what Marks calls "tactile viewing": the audience must sense emotion in its absence,

in the minute gestures that resist spectacle (p. 182). Stanley Cavell's notion of "acknowledgment" further illuminates what is at stake in these silences. Cavell (1999) suggests that acknowledgment is not reducible to knowing; it involves an ethical relationship grounded in recognition and responsiveness (p. 20). Lanthimos's characters, however, are denied the space for acknowledgment. Their interactions are scripted, predetermined, and emotionally sterilised. The ethical relation, what Butler calls the "scene of address," collapses. The subject no longer speaks *to* the other, but rather *through* the structures that pre-empt intimacy.

Moreover, Sarah Ahmed's (2004) theory of "affective economies" helps explain why these silences are politically charged. According to Ahmed, affect does not reside in the individual but circulates through collective scripts that attach emotions to bodies, norms, and values (p. 119). The silences in *Kinds of Kindness* are therefore not neutral, they indicate how certain forms of emotional expression are systematically repressed or displaced. What the viewer encounters is a regime of emotional scarcity: a world where the capacity to feel has been eroded by repetition, ritual, and coercion. Ultimately, Lanthimos constructs a world in which the silence of the script is itself a symptom of ethical exhaustion. Language no longer mediates relation, it enforces performance. The characters speak without voice, move without agency, and obey without question. In this affectively flattened terrain, the viewer is left to navigate a crisis of meaning, where ethical discernment can only emerge from what is not said, what is not shown, and what cannot be fully known. In this void, *Kinds of Kindness* does not offer solace or resolution, but a sustained encounter with ethical ambiguity rendered in the negative space of emotion.

## **5. CIRCULARITY, REINCARNATION, AND THE DEATH OF NARRATIVE LINEARITY**

In *Kinds of Kindness*, Yorgos Lanthimos presents a structural and philosophical challenge to the narrative conventions of Western cinema. Rather than building toward narrative closure, character development, or catharsis, the film intentionally suspends the viewer in a recursive matrix of repetition, fragmentation, and unresolved ethical questions. Its tripartite structure, three separate stories enacted by the same group of actors playing different roles, dismantles classical notions of continuity and identity. These reconfigured identities do not progress but are perpetually caught in cycles of moral paralysis, suggesting that kindness, as it is performed across these stories, is not a redemptive or transformative force but one that reproduces failure through endless variation. The logic underpinning this recursive design is not one of metaphysical reincarnation but of narrative entropy. The characters are not reborn in any salvific sense; rather, they are recycled within closed ethical systems that do not evolve. This aesthetic strategy reflects what Paul Ricoeur (1984) terms “narrative time,” which can either synthesize experience through emplotment or fragment it into disordered episodes (p. 64). Lanthimos opts for the latter, offering a fractured temporality in which actions do not accumulate meaning over time but instead dissolve into indistinguishability. The stories resemble ritualistic loops rather than linear arcs, their repetitions devoid of moral progression or epistemic gain.

In the first segment, the protagonist’s unbroken cycle of obedience, abandoning his wife, committing murder, and returning to his employer with the same passive demeanor, exemplifies what Freud (1920/2003) termed the “repetition compulsion”: the drive to reenact trauma in the absence of insight or resolution (p. 23). This is not a Bildungsroman, where the

subject learns and grows, but a drama of ethical inertia. Each command is executed with the same mechanical compliance, and each transgression is absorbed into a structure that refuses to acknowledge consequence. Narrative, here, ceases to function as moral instruction and becomes a technology of stasis. This cyclical logic intensifies in the second story, where the obsessive lover attempts to remake his lost partner through another woman. His project is doomed not because he fails to replicate her perfectly, but because the very act of replication destroys the singularity of the new subject. The narrative doubles back on itself: each gesture meant to preserve love becomes an instrument of erasure. As Giorgio Agamben (1999) argues, in sovereign regimes of control, the subject is reduced to a form of life that is “included through its exclusion” (p. 26). The woman is visible but silenced, present but de-voiced, trapped in a narrative that replays loss as possession. The repetition is not merely thematic; it is ontological, inscribing sameness across bodies that are no longer agents but receptacles of desire.

The third story offers the clearest dramatization of circularity in both narrative and mise-en-scène. The final beach sequence, where the protagonist walks in concentric paths searching for a woman whose existence is uncertain, literalizes the collapse of teleological movement. His journey is aimless, suspended in a spatial and temporal void that evokes Benjamin’s (2007) concept of “homogeneous empty time” (p. 261). The sequence loops upon itself through mirroring camera movements, environmental stasis, and the recursive sound of waves, each frame not a step forward but a return. The cinematic world denies rupture, change, or epiphany; instead, it seals the subject in a feedback loop of deferred meaning. This anti-linear design aligns with Deleuze’s “time-image,” in which chronology no longer orders events and the past intrudes upon the present without resolution (Deleuze, 1989, p. 68). The stories in *Kinds of*



*Kindness* do not unfold, they accrete, layering failures upon failures. They neither intersect nor diverge; they oscillate in a temporal logic that renders ethical growth impossible. The characters are trapped in temporal folds where repetition is mistaken for structure, and variation fails to produce differentiation.

Furthermore, Lanthimos's use of repetition functions as a critique of postmodern simulations of ethical action. Jean Baudrillard (1994) argues that in the age of simulation, reality is replaced by codes, signs, and rituals that circulate without anchoring referents (p. 6). The film's tripartite design becomes such a simulation, mimicking ethical drama without moral substance. Each story feigns a crisis of conscience, a transformation, a narrative arc, only to deny all of them. What remains is a pure formalism of gesture: the ritual of kindness without its spirit, the performance of redemption without the possibility of grace. From a structural perspective, this design collapses the cinematic contract between viewer and text. As Stanley Cavell (1996) suggests, the expectation of closure is not simply narrative but moral: we desire the resolution of stories as confirmation of the coherence of the world (p. 87). Lanthimos refuses such resolution, compelling the viewer to sit with ethical indeterminacy. The absence of narrative reward becomes a provocation, forcing reflection not only on what is missing in the story but on what we desire from narrative itself.

Even the *mise-en-scène* reinforces this collapse of linearity. Scenes are composed with a near-ritualistic symmetry; camera angles are repeated across stories; interior spaces mirror each other in design and mood. A hospital corridor in the second segment visually echoes the corporate hallway of the first, and both resonate with the institutional geometry of the cult's compound in the third. These spatial repetitions deny the illusion of progression, anchoring the viewer in a spatial logic that, like

the narrative, is recursive rather than developmental. The world itself becomes a stage for eternal return. Lanthimos's cinematic strategy can be read, finally, as an allegory for the exhaustion of narrative ethics in late modernity. The proliferation of stories that do not change, characters who do not grow, and choices that do not matter points to a deeper cultural malaise. As Lyotard (1984) famously declared, postmodernity marks the end of "grand narratives" the loss of faith in universal progress, truth, or morality (p. xxiv). *Kinds of Kindness* does not simply illustrate this loss; it performs it, re-enacting the death of narrative as a moral form.

## **6. BARE LIFE AND PRECARIOUS EXISTENCE: GOVERNING SUBJECTIVITY THROUGH CARE**

In *Kinds of Kindness*, Yorgos Lanthimos confronts the viewer with a chilling meditation on the condition of the human subject stripped of political agency, affective autonomy, and relational reciprocity. Across the film's triptych structure, characters are repeatedly reduced to forms of life that are not protected by ethical norms but instead administered, manipulated, and regulated by regimes of power under the guise of care. The film stages what Giorgio Agamben (1998) famously calls *bare life*, a life included in the legal-political order only by being excluded from its protections (p. 12). The protagonists, whether in relationships, institutions, or cults, are not free agents but subjects governed through precarious attachments and imposed performances of "kindness."

This regime of care, as Lanthimos presents it, is not benevolent but disciplinary. The characters are not nurtured, healed, or protected; they are reshaped, silenced, and made docile through mechanisms that appropriate the vocabulary of

compassion. This perverse transformation of care into governance aligns with Judith Butler's (2004) analysis of *precarity*, a condition in which lives are rendered vulnerable not simply by misfortune but by political design (p. 30). In *Kinds of Kindness*, the most vulnerable characters, especially women, are not protected but targeted. Their dependency is institutionalized, their agency neutralized. The ethical significance of their existence is measured not by relational interdependence but by their usefulness to a system that demands obedience under the sign of moral legitimacy. Consider the woman in the second story, who is selected and shaped to replace a deceased partner. Her consent is assumed, her personhood overwritten, and her speech gradually reduced to mimicry. She is rendered legible only to the extent that she conforms to the image projected onto her. Her fate illustrates Roberto Esposito's (2008) concept of *immunitas*, where the subject is "protected" only through withdrawal from the relational exposure that constitutes ethical life (p. 49). She is immunized from desire, risk, and alterity, and in this isolation, her life becomes politically nonviable, alive, but not allowed to matter.

Similarly, in the third story, the spiritual community's practices of "care" enact systematic biopolitical control. The characters are managed through rituals, fed and monitored, denied sleep or food in accordance with a code that demands purity and transcendence. Yet this structure does not elevate them, it erases them. Their value is derived from their capacity to endure, not their capacity to speak or relate. Here, Lanthimos echoes Michel Foucault's (1978) notion of *biopower*, the modern political rationality that governs not through law but through the optimization, regulation, and surveillance of life itself (p. 139). The cult is not a deviation from normative systems, it is their extreme expression. Within this context, subjectivity becomes conditional and unstable. The characters are not addressed as ends

in themselves but as instruments within larger ethical apparatuses. Their voices, gestures, and identities are shaped not by relational mutuality but by imposed narratives. Butler (2005) argues that subject formation requires exposure to vulnerability and a scene of address in which recognition is possible (p. 22). In Lanthimos's universe, this address never arrives. The subject is spoken *about*, acted *upon*, but rarely spoken *to*. They do not emerge through dialogue, but disappear within scripts that foreclose difference.

This configuration also parallels Achille Mbembe's (2003) theory of *necropolitics*, wherein sovereignty is exercised through the power to dictate who may live and who must die, not only biologically, but socially and ethically (p. 11). In *Kinds of Kindness*, life is preserved only in its function, and discarded the moment it resists integration. The illusion of kindness becomes a necropolitical operation: lives are spared, but only in their reduced, managed form. Compassion becomes conditional upon obedience; care becomes indistinguishable from control. Moreover, Lanthimos's mise-en-scène reinforces this ontological fragility. The characters are filmed in sterile environments: anonymous interiors, depersonalized institutions, empty corridors. These spaces are not accidental, they perform the erasure of political visibility. As Agamben (2005) observes, the *camp* is not simply a site of confinement, but a paradigmatic space where law and life are indistinguishably entangled (p. 38). In Lanthimos's film, every environment becomes a camp: not because of overt violence, but because every subject is suspended in a state of administrative capture.

This process of depersonalisation is not tragic in the conventional sense. It is systematic. The characters do not suffer dramatic downfalls; they decay in place. Their pain is not sensationalised but normalised. The viewer, confronted with this normalized fragility, is not asked to identify or weep, but to witness. This aesthetic withholding aligns with Butler's ethics of

non-spectacular suffering: the idea that not all pain must be represented dramatically for it to be politically legible (Butler, 2009, p. 64). In *Kinds of Kindness*, pain is not denied, it is desensitised, diluted, and routinised, making its ethical implications all the more urgent. Ultimately, Lanthimos constructs a cinematic ethics of *disappearance*. His characters are alive but not autonomous, visible but not recognized, preserved but not valued. Their precarity is not incidental but essential: they survive only as long as they do not resist. The film's critique is therefore not directed at cruelty per se, but at the systemic conditions under which cruelty is masked as care. In this world, to be kind is not to recognize the other, but to regulate them. To survive is not to flourish, but to comply.

## **7. THE RITUALIZATION OF POWER: AUTHORITY, OBEDIENCE, AND THEOLOGICAL STRUCTURE**

*Kinds of Kindness* does not merely depict structures of domination, it ritualizes them. Across its tripartite design, Yorgos Lanthimos presents authority not as a contingent socio-political function but as a sacralized, recurring form whose legitimacy is rarely questioned and often venerated. The figures of command, employers, lovers, cult leaders, are not simply powerful individuals; they are vessels of a theological architecture that sanctifies obedience and renders resistance either futile or sacrilegious. In this sense, power in *Kinds of Kindness* functions less as violence and more as a liturgy, codified, ceremonial, and endlessly repeated. This ritualisation aligns with Giorgio Agamben's (2011) concept of the "theological signature of sovereignty," wherein modern forms of secular authority inherit their logic from religious paradigms of divine command and ritual enactment (p. 75). In Lanthimos's film, the commands issued to

the protagonists are not deliberated upon or rationally justified; they descend like decrees, absolute, mysterious, and incontestable. The employer who asks for spousal abandonment, the lover who scripts another woman's identity, the cult leader who demands ascetic rituals, each operates within a logic of obedience that transcends justification. Power here is not negotiated; it is ritualised and thus shielded from critique.

This sacramental structure is most visible in the film's mise-en-scène. Orders are delivered in symmetrical rooms, often with characters standing in hierarchically organized frames: those who command are elevated, centered, or isolated in visual space, while those who obey are marginal, silent, or partially obscured. These spatial arrangements evoke what Michel Foucault (1977) calls the "diagram of power" a configuration that materializes authority through spatial and bodily organization (p. 170). But Lanthimos goes further, invoking not just disciplinary aesthetics but liturgical ones. The repetition of gestures, the choreographed silences, and the sterile precision of institutional spaces all contribute to a sense of secular ritual, where obedience becomes an aesthetic as much as a moral act.

Importantly, this ritualisation of obedience does not rely on coercion but on belief. Max Weber's (1965) typology of authority distinguishes between traditional, charismatic, and legal-rational forms, yet what Lanthimos presents is a fourth modality: *ritual authority*, in which legitimacy is conferred through the repetition of form, not content. The power exercised in *Kinds of Kindness* is not justified by charisma, tradition, or law but by the sheer inevitability of its recurrence. As Carl Schmitt (1985) asserts, all political theology rests on the notion of sovereignty as exception, the one who commands outside the norm (p. 36). In Lanthimos's film, this exception becomes the rule; every figure of power is an exception sustained by ritual rather than reason. The film's cult narrative literalizes this

structure, transforming spiritual belief into a bureaucratic system of sacrifice. The initiates must perform acts of ritual devotion, fasting, isolation, scripted confession, to demonstrate their worth. Yet the purpose of these acts is never fully revealed; their authority rests in their form, not in their telos. This aligns with Agamben's reading of liturgy as "a pure form without content," a space where the act is everything and the meaning is suspended (Agamben, 2007, p. 76). The characters are thus trapped not in ideology but in ritual, performing kindness, loyalty, and love without understanding, transformation, or release. The ethical implications of this ritualised power are profound. The viewer witnesses individuals who are not brutalized but sanctified into submission. The aesthetic of restraint, clean framing, monotone dialogue, mechanical pacing, mirrors the ethical impasse: resistance appears not only impossible but inconceivable. The characters obey not out of fear, but because the structure of obedience has been made sacred. They participate in rituals whose violence is obscured by their formality.

This raises the question: what happens to ethics in a world where power has been naturalised through ritual? As Agamben (1998) warns, when the exception becomes permanent, and the sacred merges with the profane, the possibility of ethical judgment collapses (p. 29). The subject no longer acts but performs; no longer decides but repeats. In *Kinds of Kindness*, kindness becomes a sacrament, not an ethical relation but a ritual gesture that absolves power even as it destroys those who enact it. Ultimately, Lanthimos presents a world in which the critique of power cannot proceed through rational discourse alone. Authority is not argued, it is enacted, dressed in the aesthetics of form, and rehearsed until it becomes indistinguishable from the moral order. The viewer is left not with answers, but with the unease of recognition: that in the repetition of rituals, even the most violent structures may pass as care.

## **8. TEMPORAL DISPLACEMENT AND SUSPENDED TIME: ETHICS IN THE ABSENCE OF HISTORY**

Time in *Kinds of Kindness* is not merely a backdrop to ethical action; it is an active force of disruption, displacement, and suspension. The film abandons conventional chronological structure and instead immerses the viewer in a recursive temporality where past, present, and future collapse into a singular, stagnant now. This arrested time, marked by repetition without progression and stasis without culmination, produces a cinematic condition in which ethical agency is severed from historical continuity. Moral decisions are no longer rooted in past experiences or future consequences but unfold in a perpetual present that renders orientation, memory, and transformation impossible. Walter Benjamin (2007) describes “homogeneous, empty time” as the temporality of modern historicism, a neutral, linear continuum in which progress is presumed but rarely questioned (p. 261). In contrast, *Kinds of Kindness* presents a violent interruption of such linearity. Each of the film’s three segments begins as though in medias res, progresses without development, and ends without resolution. The recurrence of cast, setting, and thematic material across the stories intensifies this effect, evoking what Benjamin calls “messianic time” or *Jetztzeit*: a time of rupture in which history is reconfigured as a field of sudden possibility (p. 263). Yet Lanthimos withholds even this potential. His temporal disjunctions do not open onto redemption but onto further repetition. The characters do not act within history; they are trapped outside of it.

This temporal displacement has profound ethical implications. In classical narrative structures, time serves as the ground for moral development: past decisions inform present actions, which in turn shape future consequences. In *Kinds of Kindness*, however, time is unmoored from causality. As Paul



Ricoeur (1984) notes, narrative emplotment binds events into a coherent temporal sequence that enables ethical reflection (p. 52). By disintegrating this emplotment, Lanthimos eliminates the narrative scaffolding that sustains ethical intelligibility. The protagonists do not remember, anticipate, or evolve, they repeat. The ethical weight of their actions is thus dispersed across a temporality that denies both accountability and transformation.

This suspension of historical continuity extends to the film's visual and spatial design. Locations, hotels, clinics, corridors, seashores, recur across narratives with minimal alteration. These spaces are devoid of temporal markers: no calendars, no clocks, no technological identifiers. As Jean-Luc Nancy (1993) argues, temporality is not merely duration but "ex-position," the being-outside-oneself in the unfolding of time (p. 35). Lanthimos's characters are denied this ex-position; they are sealed within time rather than extended by it. Their ethical selves do not emerge in relation to past or future but remain confined in a looping present that evacuates temporal depth. A vivid example of this occurs in the beach sequence of the final story. The protagonist walks in circles, calling out for someone who may not exist, surrounded by an unchanging landscape. The tide does not shift, the sky remains static, and his voice echoes into emptiness. This scene literalizes the condition of suspended time: motion without progression, longing without memory, presence without relationality. Gilles Deleuze (1989) would call this a "time-image" a cinematic configuration in which movement no longer determines time, and time ceases to orient narrative (p. 271). In such moments, the ethical question is not what should be done, but whether action is even possible.

Moreover, the film's flattened affect and performative monotony further intensify this temporal dislocation. As the characters enact gestures of care, sacrifice, and obedience without emotional inflection, the viewer becomes aware that these actions

are no longer situated within temporal or moral trajectories. They become rituals untethered from context, spectral echoes of ethics in a world that has forgotten how to locate value in time. This recalls Lyotard's (1984) thesis that the postmodern condition is marked by an "incredulity toward metanarratives" (p. xxiv). In Lanthimos's film, it is not only the metanarratives of progress or redemption that dissolve, but the very capacity to relate events to one another across time.

This results in what might be called an ethics of temporal exhaustion. The protagonists do not commit moral failures in the traditional sense; rather, they are incapable of moral emergence because time has ceased to offer orientation. Ethical life requires memory, anticipation, and the integration of experience across moments. Lanthimos denies these structures, placing his characters in a kind of atemporal abyss where every gesture is emptied of historical force. Their kindness, obedience, and love are not responses to events, they are detached performances without origin or end. Thus, *Kinds of Kindness* is not merely a film about moral confusion, but about ethical disintegration under the weight of suspended temporality. By severing action from history, and subjectivity from time, Lanthimos constructs a cinematic universe in which morality itself becomes spectral, a faded echo in a world where time no longer moves.

## **9. FAILURE AS FORM: ETHICAL DECOMPOSITION AND THE AESTHETICS OF DEGENERATION**

*Kinds of Kindness* is not a film about success, redemption, or even tragic downfall; it is a cinematic study in structural failure, failure not as narrative deviation, but as constitutive form. Across its three segments, the film stages repetition without transformation, ethical encounters without resolution, and

identities without coherence. Lanthimos is not simply presenting characters who fail to achieve kindness, love, or moral clarity, he is constructing an aesthetic world in which failure is the default state of ethical life. In this universe, failure is not accidental; it is ontological. Each story begins with a premise that gestures toward classical ethical structures: loyalty to an employer, fidelity to a lost lover, commitment to a spiritual cause. Yet each of these promises rapidly deteriorates, not through dramatic betrayal, but through the slow erosion of meaning. There are no pivotal moments of collapse, no epiphanies or reversals. Instead, failure accumulates incrementally, through repetition, ritual, and emotional depletion, until action itself becomes indistinguishable from breakdown. This recalls Samuel Beckett's (1983) famous dictum: "Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better" (p. 7). But Lanthimos refuses even the minimal optimism of Beckett's recursive persistence. In his cinema, there is no better; there is only deeper, more refined failure.

The film's refusal to resolve or reconfigure its ethical crises aligns with Theodor Adorno's (2004) assertion that "in the face of the world's horror, art must resist reconciliation" (p. 222). Lanthimos's work enacts precisely such resistance. Rather than offering consolation or catharsis, it presents ethical decomposition as the only possible response to a world in which sincerity, care, and moral coherence have become untenable. His characters fail not because they are weak or flawed, but because the ethical frameworks that once sustained action have collapsed under the weight of repetition and simulation. This aesthetic of degeneration is also formal. The film's structure, the triptych repetition, minimal narrative progression, monotone performance, constructs a cinematic logic of exhaustion. As Hal Foster (1996) notes in his study of the "return of the real," postmodern art often stages "the breakdown of representation" not to restore authenticity but to expose the void behind cultural

and ethical forms (p. 132). *Kinds of Kindness* functions in precisely this way: it rehearses ethical gestures, kindness, love, loyalty, not to recover their meaning, but to reveal their hollowness.

Kristeva's (1982) concept of the abject further illuminates this aesthetic strategy. The abject is not what is opposed to the self, but what disrupts its coherence, what cannot be assimilated but cannot be expelled (p. 4). In Lanthimos's cinema, failure functions abjectly. It cannot be overcome or resolved; it lingers, stains, destabilizes. The viewer is not invited to sympathize or condemn, but to endure. Ethical decay is not narrated, it is embodied, suspended, and ritualized. The repeated failures of the protagonists become not moral deviations but aesthetic motifs, refrains in a cinematic fugue of futility. Importantly, Lanthimos's film rejects the tragic as a category. Tragedy traditionally presupposes a fall from grace, an ethical arc. But in *Kinds of Kindness*, there is no grace to fall from. The characters begin in states of ambiguity, continue in states of compliance, and end in states of dissociation. Their failures are not individualized but systemic; not moral errors but ontological outcomes. As Lyotard (1984) argues, postmodernity involves an "incredulity toward metanarratives" (p. xxiv), and *Kinds of Kindness* enacts this incredulity through the disintegration of narrative and ethical teleology.

This raises a crucial question: what does it mean to fail in a world that no longer believes in success? In classical ethics, failure is instructive, it generates knowledge, remorse, or transformation. In Lanthimos's universe, failure teaches nothing. It neither punishes nor redeems. It circulates, repeats, and accumulates. The failure of kindness is not a fall from ethical possibility, it is the revelation that kindness, as a structure of meaning, has ceased to function. The film thus performs what Lyotard would call an "anamnesis of the lost cause" a

remembering not to restore, but to testify (Lyotard, 1992, p. 110). Ultimately, *Kinds of Kindness* presents failure not as the exception but as the rule. It is embedded in the narrative structure, aesthetic form, and ethical grammar of the film. The result is a cinema of decomposition a formal and moral unravelling that confronts the viewer with the exhaustion of ethical possibility in a world that has ritualised its own collapse.

## **10. CONCLUSION: ETHICAL AMBIGUITY AND CINEMATIC ALLEGORY**

*Kinds of Kindness* resists interpretation not because it is obscure, but because it deliberately evacuates the normative coordinates that make ethical judgment intelligible. Across its recursive narrative structure, affectively flattened performances, ritualised power dynamics, and suspended temporality, Yorgos Lanthimos constructs a cinematic allegory of ethical exhaustion. His characters do not simply fail to act morally, they are entrapped in a system where moral action has become structurally impossible. The film presents a universe in which kindness, rather than being a virtue, functions as an aestheticized ritual, emptied of sincerity and repurposed as an instrument of domination. Through this gesture, Lanthimos offers a radical critique of contemporary ethical paradigms, one that does not diagnose individual failings but interrogates the ontological and narrative conditions under which ethical subjectivity is produced, deformed, and ultimately undone.

The film's tripartite structure resists progression or cumulative learning. Each segment replays variations of the same moral entanglements: obedience masquerading as kindness, love transforming into possession, and spirituality devolving into submission. The recurrence of these motifs, performed by the same actors in different roles, produces a narrative echo chamber

in which difference is neutralized and moral novelty is foreclosed. This narrative structure aligns with what Gilles Deleuze (1989) terms the “crystal-image,” wherein time folds upon itself and the future becomes indistinguishable from the past (p. 98). Lanthimos’s repetition is not productive but entropic. It generates neither renewal nor redemption but reveals the exhaustion of ethical possibility in a world where action has been severed from consequence.

This ethical stasis is mirrored in the film’s affective economy. The characters do not speak with conviction, gesture with passion, or break into moral crisis. Instead, they perform obedience, suffering, and even rebellion as if guided by an impersonal script. As Laura Marks (2000) suggests, haptic visuality compels the viewer to engage with the image not through identification but through embodied disorientation (p. 182). In *Kinds of Kindness*, this disorientation becomes ethical: the viewer is denied the comfort of moral alignment, invited instead to inhabit the discomfort of ambiguity. The film refuses to grant the viewer a position of judgment. There are no heroes, no villains, and no clear moral centre, only variations of submission, complicity, and incomprehension.

By removing ethical decisions from historical, relational, and emotional contexts, Lanthimos constructs what Walter Benjamin (2007) might call a *state of exception*, a space in which the rules of ethical engagement have been suspended (p. 392). In this world, characters act not in relation to the past or in anticipation of the future but within a permanent “now” that forecloses transformation. The film’s refusal to grant closure or narrative arc is thus not an aesthetic choice alone but a moral intervention: it compels the viewer to reflect on the limits of ethics under conditions of recursion, abstraction, and affective depletion.

In this sense, *Kinds of Kindness* can be read as a cinematic allegory of postmodern ethical decomposition. The gestures of kindness, love, and faith are not abolished but abstracted to the point of meaninglessness. Like the ritual forms that Agamben (2007) critiques, liturgies that persist in form long after their content has faded, Lanthimos's characters reenact the motions of moral life without access to its transformative power (p. 76). Their gestures are not symbolic; they are simulacral. The film thus stages the death of ethical realism: the collapse of belief in the authenticity of virtue under late modern conditions.

Yet what emerges from this collapse is not nihilism but critical possibility. By pushing ethical forms to their limits, by repeating them until they break, Lanthimos compels the viewer to reckon with the residual traces of moral desire. The very emptiness of these gestures invites interrogation. Why do we still value kindness, loyalty, sacrifice, when they so often conceal subjugation, control, and violence? What is left of ethics when its rituals no longer deliver meaning? In refusing closure, the film opens a space for ethical thinking not grounded in certainty but in difficulty. The viewer must navigate a world where compassion is contaminated, virtue is performative, and love is indistinguishable from possession. This is not a film that offers moral exemplars; it is a film that exposes the fragility of the moral categories themselves. Its allegory lies not in pointing to external systems of oppression, but in reflecting the internal contradictions of our desire for ethical legibility in a world where legibility itself is suspect.

The cinematic experience of *Kinds of Kindness*, then, is not one of resolution but of endurance. The viewer endures ambiguity, stasis, and repetition, not as punishment, but as philosophical exercise. In this way, Lanthimos joins a lineage of postmodern artists who, like Beckett, Adorno, and Lyotard, resist narrative consolation in favour of epistemic destabilization. His

film is not a parable but a test: of the spectator's patience, ethical reflexes, and aesthetic assumptions. In the end, *Kinds of Kindness* offers no answer to the ethical dilemmas it stages. It merely exposes their inescapability. The kindness it portrays is not virtuous but viral, a repetition that spreads through systems, bodies, and language, mutating as it goes. The film's genius lies in making this ethical ambiguity not a failure of representation, but its central form. In Lanthimos's world, we do not overcome ambiguity, we inhabit it.



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## ŽIŽEK’S “THING” AND BRONTË’S JANE

Dilara Sena BAŞ<sup>1</sup>

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Critics have called the English novelist and poet Charlotte Brontë's 1847 novel *Jane Eyre* a work about love, freedom, and finding yourself for a long time. The novel might seem like a traditional love story at first, with a plain but good woman winning the heart of a powerful man. But if you look more closely, you will see that Brontë is doing more than just writing a love story. She is also looking into how romantic desire is able to change how people see the world, making them symbols instead of real people. The Slovenian philosopher and cultural theorist Slavoj Žižek's 1994 essay “Courtly Love, or Woman as Thing” talks about his psychoanalytic theory of courtly love, which is one way to understand this dynamic. Žižek (1994) argues that courtly love is not really about the woman; it's about how the man uses the woman as an idealised object to make his life meaningful. The beloved becomes what Žižek calls “the Thing” – not a real person with her own desires, but a fantasy figure who organizes the lover's emotional world (Žižek, 1994, p. 90). In this model, love is not a meeting between equals but a structured illusion where the woman is put on a pedestal while remaining distant and inaccessible.

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In *Jane Eyre*, Mr. Rochester initially treats Jane in exactly this way. He sees her as morally superior, spiritually pure, and emotionally grounded – a mysterious figure who offers him redemption. Jane, in turn, begins to fall into this symbolic role, especially as she becomes more entangled in his world at Thornfield. But Brontë (2001) does not let Jane stay an ideal or passive character in someone else's story. As the story goes on, Jane slowly realises how she is being portrayed and fights against being turned into a fantasy. Jane will not be Mr. Rochester's mistress, even though she loves him deeply. She leaves him to protect her own dignity and independence. Her eventual return to him is not a return to fantasy but a renewal of love on different terms – based on equality and mutual recognition. This transformation complicates the structure of courtly love. It also reveals Brontë's (2001) deeper interest in freedom, subjectivity, and moral integrity.

Charlotte Brontë (2001) both uses and challenges the courtly love tradition in *Jane Eyre*. Although anachronistically, she first puts Jane in the role of Žižek's "Thing" and then lets her reject it, claiming her independence and turning love from an illusion into a real, mutual bond. As Nancy Armstrong notes, "the novel of domesticity constructs femininity through denial of female agency, only to later resolve this by granting a limited form of self-expression through romantic union" (1987, p. 94). Brontë (2001) follows this arc but ultimately transcends it – allowing Jane not merely limited self-expression but full moral subjectivity beyond idealization.

## **2. JANE AS THE ŽIŽEKIAN "THING"**

In the early stages of their relationship, Mr. Rochester places Jane into the position of the idealized woman described by Žižek (1994) in his theory of courtly love. According to Žižek, in

this dynamic, the beloved “is never simply the positive object of desire, but the material support of a fantasy” (1994, p. 90). The lover projects all his inner turmoil and longing onto the woman, turning her into a symbolic figure rather than recognizing her as a subject with her own needs and flaws. This is evident in the way Rochester speaks about Jane after their engagement. He declares, “My cherished preserver, good angel of my life!” (Brontë, 2001, p. 278), casting her as a moral saviour rather than a real, complex woman. In doing so, he detaches her from the material world and reimagines her as a pure spirit who exists to redeem him. His nickname for her, “fairy,” also reinforces this idea: “You – poor and obscure, and small and plain as you are – I entreat to accept me as a husband ... My equal is here, and my likeness” (Brontë, 2001, p. 252). While this statement seems to suggest equality, his language – “entreat,” “accept,” and the constant references to her smallness – implies that he is elevating her to a symbolic pedestal. Žižek’s (1994) discussion of the painter in the English poet Christina Rossetti’s posthumously published 1896 poem “In an Artist’s Studio” presents a parallelism to Rochester’s idealization of Jane. The way that Žižek interprets the figure of the artist who repeatedly paints the same woman and Rochester carry similar traits: “the void of his own desire” can be seen in both of the mentioned males (Žižek, 1994, p. 91). Like the painter, Rochester transforms Jane into the canvas of his own inner lack.

Žižek argues that courtly love “functions as a kind of screen, a veil which covers the Real of desire” (1994, p. 91). Rochester’s idealization of Jane works in this way. In other words, it covers up his own internal emptiness, his guilt, and the secret of Bertha Mason. Rather than facing these directly, he turns Jane into the image of salvation. Her moral clarity and quiet strength allow him to indulge in the fantasy that love alone can cure his despair. Jane becomes, in Žižek’s terms, “the Thing” – a woman “reduced to a passive screen” for the man’s emotional

projection (Žižek, 1994, p. 92). This idealization is seductive but ultimately dehumanizing, as Jane begins to sense. This symbolic function of Jane aligns with what Joan Copjec calls the “object-cause of desire,” where the ‘Thing’ is “not an actual object but the void around which desire is organized” (Copjec, 1994, p. 52). To put it differently, Jane is not valued for who she is but for the emotional gap she helps Rochester conceal – a mechanism that turns her into a screen rather than a subject.

### **3. JANE’S REJECTION OF THE FANTASY**

Although Jane is initially drawn into the fantasy Rochester creates around her, she ultimately refuses to be reduced to a symbolic object of his desire. Her decision to leave Thornfield after discovering the existence of Bertha Mason marks a critical moment where she resists the structure of courtly love that Žižek (1994) describes. According to Žižek, in the model of courtly love, the beloved woman “is not loved for herself, but because she provides a screen onto which the male subject can project his fantasies and confront his own lack” (1994, p. 90). When Jane discovers that she is being asked to participate in a morally corrupt relationship by becoming Rochester’s mistress, she sees that his love is still bound by illusion and domination. Despite her deep love for him, she asserts her autonomy. She says, “I care for myself. The more solitary, the more friendless, the more unsustained I am, the more I will respect myself” (Brontë, 2001, p. 306). In this moment, Jane breaks the fantasy. She refuses to be a substitute or a saviour. Instead, she demands to be recognized as a subject with moral agency. In this act of refusal, Jane enacts what Gilbert and Gubar describe as “the woman’s story” being “a story of escape from the silence imposed on her by patriarchal ideology” (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979, p. 336). Her decision to leave

Thornfield is not merely emotional self-preservation – it is also a feminist rejection of symbolic silencing through idealization.

Her escape from Thornfield is not simply an act of emotional pain – it is an act of symbolic rebellion. In Žižekian terms, Jane disrupts the fantasy structure by confronting the Real – the traumatic truth behind Rochester’s romantic illusion. Žižek writes, “What the subject gets back in courtly love is not the beloved herself, but his own desire” (1994, p. 93). Jane refuses to play this role. She will not allow Rochester to “get back his own desire” at the cost of her dignity and freedom. Instead, she walks away, refusing to be the Thing that gives his life meaning. This act of refusal is what separates Jane from the typical passive heroine of romantic fiction. Brontë allows her protagonist to escape the symbolic role imposed on her and to define love on her own terms.

#### **4. LOVE REIMAGINED – BEYOND THE FANTASY**

When Jane returns to Rochester at the end of the novel, their relationship has shifted. The romantic illusion that once framed their love is gone, replaced by a new understanding rooted in equality, vulnerability, and mutual recognition. Rochester is no longer the powerful, idealizing figure who placed Jane on a pedestal. After losing his sight and part of his hand in the fire that destroyed Thornfield, he is physically and emotionally humbled. He confesses to Jane saying, “I am no better than the old lightning-struck chestnut tree in Thornfield orchard” (Brontë, 2001, p. 368). This admission signals that the fantasy – built on dominance, secrecy, and control – has been shattered. Žižek writes that in the courtly love tradition, “the true aim is not to obtain the beloved, but to sustain the desire” (1994, p. 90). But Brontë resists this logic: Jane and Rochester do not preserve



distance to maintain desire; they come together as flawed, human beings who now see each other clearly. This evolution in their relationship reflects what Carla Kaplan terms “dialogic subjectivity,” which “replaces the monologic fantasies of romantic love with mutual recognition and emotional reciprocity” (Kaplan, 1996, p. 118). Their love no longer relies on illusion or symbolic roles but is instead grounded in vulnerability and honest dialogue.

Importantly, Jane no longer returns as a powerless object of desire. She comes back with financial independence, emotional strength, and self-knowledge. She narrates, “I am my husband’s life as fully as he is mine ... To be together is for us to be at once as free as in solitude, as gay as in company” (Brontë, 2001, p. 385). In this moment, love is no longer a fantasy built on projection – it becomes a shared experience between equals. This resolution breaks the Žižekian structure, where love depends on the beloved remaining a distant, inaccessible “Thing.” Instead, Brontë offers a radical reimagining of romantic love: not as illusion or longing, but as recognition and real companionship. Jane, who once functioned as the mirror of Rochester’s desire, now becomes a partner who loves freely, not because she is idealized, but because she is seen – and sees – in return. What Helene Moglen observes about the novel supports this reading. She comments that “Jane Eyre is not a romantic fantasy but a Bildungsroman in which the female protagonist achieves moral authority and personal identity” (Moglen, 1976, p. 144). Brontë offers not just a love story, but a narrative of psychological and ethical development.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* begins within the structure of courtly love, with Jane cast in the role of Žižek’s “Thing” – the

idealized woman whose mystery and moral strength structure Rochester's desire. However, through Jane's refusal to be reduced to an object of fantasy and her insistence on personal integrity, the novel steadily dismantles this ideological model. As Žižek explains, courtly love turns the beloved into a symbolic screen for the lover's internal lack, sustaining a fantasy rather than a true emotional connection (1994, pp. 90–91). Brontë critiques this dynamic by allowing Jane to step out of that symbolic role, leave the relationship on her own terms, and return only when both she and Rochester are transformed – when love is no longer a performance, but a reality based on mutual recognition and respect.

*Jane Eyre* ultimately challenges the ideological illusion that Žižek (1994) describes. Rather than preserving desire through distance and idealization, Brontë moves her characters toward intimacy through truth, equality, and agency. Jane does not remain “the Thing.” She becomes a subject who speaks, acts, and chooses. Through her journey, Brontë offers a powerful redefinition of love – not as a symptom of lack or a fantasy screen, but as a real bond between equals who have faced themselves and each other without illusion. In doing so, *Jane Eyre* not only rewrites the rules of romantic fiction but also presents a feminist counter-narrative to the traditional structure of courtly love.

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# **BECOMING THE BOURGEOIS: CLASS MOBILITY, ALIENATION, AND IDENTITY IN *GREAT EXPECTATIONS*, *WUTHERING HEIGHTS*, AND *NORTH AND SOUTH***

**Şafak NEDİCEYUVA<sup>1</sup>**

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The Victorian era was a period of industrialization and urbanization, and consequently, a period of unprecedented reshaping of the class structures and traditional social hierarchies for the British. Migration from rural to urban areas, the restructuring of the working class, acquisition of economic and cultural dominance by the middle class, and the gradual dissolution of the aristocracy all found strong echoes in the literature of the period. In this context, class mobility, especially one's social transition from the lower classes to the upper classes, becomes one of the most prominent themes of Victorian society and its literature. Hartmut Kaelble argues that: "this period now seems to be characterized by restricted social mobility rather than by a spectacular increase in the rate of mobility" (Kaelble, 1948, p. 491). According to him, contrary to common assumptions, "it seems more appropriate to regard it as a period of crisis for important strata of society rather than as a golden age of high social mobility with opportunities open to all talents" (p. 494). Reading Kaelble's arguments leads us to believe that Victorian writers exaggerated or overrepresented the frequency of social

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movement between classes. While Kaelble highlights constraints on social mobility, Long shows considerable movement was happening. His article notes that “mobility rates were substantially greater than has been previously estimated, to the extent that mobility in the 1850s was only slightly less than in the 1970s (Long, 2013, p. 1)”. While the disagreement between Kaelble and Long makes social ascent in Victorian England a topic of Sociology, this article attempts to shift the focus to literature and argues that such instances of individual economic betterment are not only personal success stories but also accounts of rupture and trauma in terms of identity, belonging, and morality.

What happens when one acquires wealth without the cultural capital to match it? For the individual and the society, the possibility of “rising above one’s station” creates optimism and anxiety at the same time, as it entails betterment for the individual, while simultaneously threatening to subvert traditional identities and values. Victorian literature functioned as both a mirror and an ideological engine for this anxiety. In Victorian fiction, the movement of characters between classes often heralds not only a social transition but also an internal transformation, even disintegration. In these narratives of ascent, which were occasionally triumphant, sometimes tragic, and mostly ambivalent; characters are often forced to distance themselves from their own origins and they invite us to ask: What does it mean to move “up” in a society that polices belonging to a social class? Most of the time, as characters attempt to learn the language, manners, and values of classes to which they do not belong, they both stay alien to the new class and lose touch with their old world. Thus, Victorian fiction explores whether new identities can be forged, or if they are doomed to collapse under the weight of old loyalties.

This article aims to examine how upward class mobility was represented in three landmark Victorian novels: Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations* (1861), Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847) and Elizabeth Gaskell *North and South* (1855) through the lenses of Marxist literary criticism and a discussion of the novel genre. I argue that class ascension in these works is rarely triumphant; instead, it is fraught with identity crises and cultural alienation. Each text addresses the phenomenon of upward social mobility, but through different narrative forms, ideological commitments, and character trajectories. These three novels deal with the theme of class transition in different contexts, revealing in different ways the emotional and moral dimensions of the social transformation experienced by the characters. Therefore, genre is a determining force in how Victorian novels construct the experience and consequences of class mobility.

In *Great Expectations*, Dickens shows the fragmentations of the individual. His use of realism and the Bildungsroman structure positions class transition as a personal failure of assimilation. Pip's shame and alienation during his childhood fuels his desire to be a member of the upper class, yet his economic achievements are not enough to erase his class origins. While Pip's class mobility is intertwined with the narrative of individual progress drawn by the realist Bildungsroman genre, it ultimately negates the promise of the genre because of his alienation.

Meanwhile, in *Wuthering Heights*, Heathcliff's upwards class mobility occurs under mysterious conditions, and the narrative focuses not on his emotional and cultural transformation, but on the final result this transformation. Heathcliff's class transition is not an effort to assimilate into gentry society but to destroy it from within. Brontë's Gothic form, by contrast, resists such a Realist approach, rendering class as a symbolic force. By shaping the story with the tools of the Gothic,

the novel presents its antagonist's journey of exclusion and revenge in a symbolic and violent, rather than a Realist way.

Conversely, Gaskell offers a third model, one that imagines class boundaries as penetrable and reformable, and shows the opportunities presented by empathy. Unlike Pip and Heathcliff, Margaret Hale in Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* does not "rise" between classes, but rather, she is a mediator between them. Her character brings classes together by promoting dialogue and reform. Here, class movement happens not on an economic, but on a moral level, offering a vision of class transition through mutual transformation rather than trauma.

## **2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

In this respect, the study will handle the topic of class mobility in Victorian fiction not only thematically, but also as an ideological axis upon which narrative discourses are established. This article establishes an analytical foundation by combining Marxist literary criticism, and a discussion of the novel genre. It proceeds in three sections, where each novel character— Pip, Heathcliff and Margaret—will be examined in detail within the relevant genre contexts; followed by a comparative synthesis that traces the role of literary form in representing social movement, seeking a full assessment of the costs and limits of "becoming bourgeois" in Victorian literature.

At the heart of this inquiry lies Marxist literary criticism, a tradition that foregrounds the material and ideological conditions under which literature is produced. As mentioned, Marxist theory treats literature as a product of the historical-social context in which it is produced. Literature is not only a passive mirror of class structures, but also a field in which the unconscious ideological representations of these structures take shape. In this context, the Victorian novel becomes a platform on

which class shifts, conflicts and identifications that emerged under the influence of capitalist transformation are staged. Marxist literary critics claim literary texts both reflect and reproduce the relations of production in which they take place. Thus, novels, especially realist ones, function as both products and critiques of the class structures they depict. Novels can be considered not only as reflectors of social change, but also as works that give meaning to, legitimize, or question this change. In *Marxism and Literary Criticism*, Eagleton asserts that “Art, then, is for Marxism part of the ‘superstructure’ of society”, and that “literary works are not mysteriously inspired, or explicable simply in terms of their authors’ psychology” (Eagleton, 2003, p. 5). Examining Victorian novels in the context of class mobility requires questioning not only individual destinies or narrative plots, but also the ideological function of literature. In the context of upward social mobility, as seen in these novels, climbing the social ladder is synonymous with anxiety, blunder, alienation, and guilt.

To consider the issue of class solely on the level of economic capital would be to ignore the cultural and symbolic dimensions of upward mobility. This is where Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of cultural capital and habitus come into play. Bourdieu states in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* that individuals need not only money but also certain social skills, tastes and bodily postures in order to maintain or change their class position (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 91). Class operates not only through material resources but through codes of behavior, language, and aesthetic taste— what he calls “habitus” (p. 6). These characteristics determine whether the individual is considered legitimate in the social sphere.

This conceptual framework is extremely functional in terms of understanding Pip's psychological collapse in *Great Expectations*. Although Pip approaches the upper class



economically, he cannot internalize their cultural codes. The formal characteristics of the novel genre directly affect how it represents class mobility. For example, one can expect that in the realist Bildungsroman style, the protagonist's journey will follow a linear path of maturation and self-discovery. However, this form does not always present a success story as Dickens subverts these expectations of the genre and focuses on the emotional cost of mobility. We can see that Pip's journey conforms to this structure, but that Dickens subverts the Bildungsroman genre's promise of individual betterment by exposing the emotional cost of class mobility.

In contrast to Dickens' realism, Brontë's Gothic style explores class on the level of internalized traumas, symbols, and fears. In *Wuthering Heights*, although Heathcliff's rise in class is central to the narrative, this movement is never explained realistically. Instead, the narrative is shaped by violence, death, ghosts, and emotional extremes. His refusal to culturally assimilate into the upper-class behaviours becomes a stand against the class system that marginalized him as a child.

A different genre, what we might call reformist realism, can be seen in Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*. Gaskell's style treats class conflicts not as absolute oppositions but as potential for dialogue and transformation. Margaret Hale's mediation between opposing social classes represents the central ethical stance of her reformist realism. The novel is a clear example of the 19<sup>th</sup> century "condition-of-England" literature, which seeks to portray the conflict between capital and the working class, urban and rural, the modern and the traditional. Unlike Pip, Gaskell's Margaret Hale neither collapses under the pressure of social difference, nor does she return to destroy those who rejected her like Heathcliff. Instead, she mediates between classes, negotiating solidarity with workers (Higgins) and empathy with capitalists (Thornton). This social mediation is

made possible by her feminine ethical competence. The female character's power to reform cannot be effective without questioning the cultural production of gender roles. Thus, gender is both a possibility and a delimiter in the representation of class mobility. Gaskell's narrative suggests that dialogue can enable social mobility without isolation.

When these theoretical approaches are considered together, it is seen that the Victorian novel portrays class transition never purely as an economic or individual incident, but as a cultural act, a narrative event, and an ideological battleground. Thus, while Victorian Britain presents the individual with the means to achieve economic freedom, literature of the period usually captures the cultural and ideological crises entailed with it. Accordingly, the Victorian novel becomes a stage for exploring this crisis.

### **3. PIP'S RISE AND FALL IN *GREAT EXPECTATIONS*: BELONGING NOWHERE**

While Charles Dickens explores in *David Copperfield* the difficulty of an unexpected fall into the working class, *Great Expectations* attempts the opposite: the perils of a sudden rise in social status. In Victorian fiction, class mobility is not simply a matter of changing social position; it is also a site of identity conflict which comes with an emotional cost. In *Great Expectations* (1861), the class shame experienced by the protagonist Pip in his childhood initiates a process that directs his entire life and leads to disintegration. Dickens creates Pip's journey as a story from humble beginnings as an orphan to a gentleman in the capital of the British Empire. Pip's desire for upward mobility brings him both material gain and emotional collapse. *Great Expectations* associates Pip's ambition to join the upper-class with an ambition for status and wealth, and his aim is

not to be a better person, but to be better off. Therefore, Pip's failure to realistically represent the class he enters shows Dickens's uncertainty about the promises of modernity and bourgeois society.

Pip's class awareness is evident in his childhood as it begins with Pip meeting Estella at Miss Havisham's house. Estella's crushing comments are the starting point of Pip's shame: "He calls the knaves Jacks, this boy!" said Estella with disdain, before our first game was out. "And what coarse hands he has! And what thick boots!" (Dickens, 2008, p. 55). This scene shows that Estella, while she is not a member of the true aristocracy, holds what Pierre Bourdieu would call cultural capital. Even if she is not socially aristocratic, she has internalized the manners, language, and behaviors of that class. As Pierre Bourdieu explains in his *Distinction*, cultural capital is measured not just by what you have, but by how you talk, how you look, how you act (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 13). Pip's feeling of being incomplete by these criteria sends him into a lifelong cycle of alienation.

From that point forward, Pip's desire to transform his identity is driven by his unending desire to become worthy in Estella's eyes, but in this process, he becomes ashamed of his past and alienated from the realities of the class he tries to belong to. Pip's discomfort mirrors Peter M. Blau's concept of "mobility dilemmas," wherein interpersonal integration becomes difficult as the mobile individual becomes a marginal figure (Blau, 1956, p. 290). Pip's obsessive love for Estella is not only an individual but also a class fetishization. Estella is more than just his object of desire; she is a concrete symbol of class advancement.

When an anonymous sponsor bestows upon him a fortune (which Pip mistakenly believes comes from Miss Havisham), he is transported to London to begin his transformation. But this transformation is not one of substance; it is theatrical. Pip reflects

on his internal state, noting: "As Joe and Biddy became more at their cheerful ease again, I became quite gloomy. Dissatisfied with my fortune, of course I could not be; but it is possible that I may have been, without quite knowing it, dissatisfied with myself" (Dickens, 2008, p. 131). Alan Lelchuk describes Pip's decline during this period: "Gradually he acquires a costumed, powdered self, glorying in self-gratification, studied sloth, gluttonous immorality. The process of dehumanization parallels the ascendancy of the aristocratic prig; as he moves up the social ladder, he sinks lower on the human. (Lelchuk, 1970, p. 410)". This adoption of a superficial identity marks the beginning of the moral degradation and alienation central to his experience. His newfound status quickly leads to condescension, as Pip recounts: "As I passed the church, I felt...a sublime compassion for the poor creatures who were destined to go there... I promised myself that I would do something for them... and formed a plan... for bestowing a dinner... a pint of ale, and a gallon of condescension upon everybody in the village" (Dickens, 2008, p. 133).

Pip adopts the lifestyle of a gentleman, hiring a servant and acquiring fine clothes. Yet, he is constantly haunted by the ghosts of his past. The shame Pip experiences, especially during his blacksmith brother-in-law Joe Gargery's visit to London, is the most visible form of class anxiety. Pip thinks: "If I could have kept him away by paying money, I certainly would have paid money" (Dickens, 2008, p. 199). Thus, Pip's moral compass falters as his desire for social acceptance overtakes his loyalty to those who shaped him. Joe, with quiet dignity, perceives the divide, explaining to Pip upon his departure, "...life is made of ever so many partings welded together... Divisions among such must come, and must be met as they come... You and me is not two figures to be together in London... I'm wrong in these clothes. I'm wrong out of the forge, the kitchen, or off th' meshes..." (Dickens, 2008, p. 205).

Pip's reaction to Joe's arrival illustrates an effect Dickens associated with class consciousness. Masao Hasegawa notes Dickens's concern that aspirations for upward mobility would incite working-class people to belittle and feel contempt for their fellows and for themselves, which would lead to dissonance within their own class. (Hasegawa, 2021, p. 311-2)". Pip's desire for acceptance into the upper class thus creates a contempt for his actual class condition, which contributes to his moral faltering. Later, Pip feels guilty for having treated Joe and Biddy with contempt and anxiety, fearing they would hinder his rise in society. However, his guilt doesn't lead him to treat them any better: it only leaves him paralyzed and passive, so it offers no real redemption.

Pip's fantasizing about Miss Havisham as the owner of the fortune that is the engine of Pip's class advancement shows his need to romanticize his own success. But the truth is very different: the source of the fortune is Magwitch, a convict whom he rescued in the past, when he was not even a stranger, and who was ostracized by society. This revelation is the collapse of the fantasy that Pip has constructed about himself and society: "The abhorrence in which I held the man, the dread I had of him, the repugnance with which I shrank from him, could not have been exceeded if he had been some terrible beast" (Dickens, 2008, p. 292). This connection to the criminal underworld haunts Pip, who feels: "how strange it was that I should be encompassed by all this taint of prison and crime... that it should have reappeared on two occasions... that it should in this new way pervade my fortune and advancement" (Dickens, 2008, p. 241). This discovery exposes the moral contradictions of Victorian society: while society encourages individuals to be meritocratic, these individuals are not considered legitimate without forgetting their origins. Pip's wealth is not considered legitimate because it comes from someone the system has excluded —not by society, nor by Pip

himself. This aligns with Blau's notion of the "marginal man," who becomes "out of tune with others both in their new and original strata in the occupational hierarchy." Peter M. Blau further asserts that "the dilemmas faced by mobile individuals in their interpersonal relations inhibit social integration" (Blau, 1956, p. 290). Pip's inability to feel at home in London society reflects exactly this inhibited integration. Pip's discomfort among London's aristocracy and his eventual return to the authenticity of the lower-class is an example of his mismatches between economic and cultural mobility. Pip adopts the outward rituals of the upper class — manners, dress, demeanor — but "mistakes ceremonial for working values," failing to grasp the more practical, unwritten social behaviors required for true belonging. As Turner warns, "the upwardly mobile person is likely to impair his chances of attaining the success that he values by his overly rigid internalization of putative middle-class values" (Turner, 1956, p. 362).

*Great Expectations* begins formally as a Bildungsroman, or a coming-of-age novel. The Bildungsroman typically charts a protagonist's development into social maturity, aligning personal growth with social integration. However, Dickens questions the traditional structure of this genre. The Bildungsroman envisions the character finding his place within the social system; but Pip's maturity occurs not by entering the system but by exiting it. When he loses his fortune and returns to Joe and his home, he finally develops an ethical awareness. Dickens deconstructs the Bildungsroman form by making Pip's development a result of his failure. The novel offers no stable model of class assimilation; instead, it suggests that the very attempt to become someone else results in fracture. However, Pip's snobbery and failing personality can be seen as more than just personal weaknesses resulting from his aspirations. John H. Hagan argues in his "The Poor Labyrinth: The Theme of Social Injustice in Dickens's

'*Great Expectations*'" that Pip is fundamentally a victim of broader societal ills, suggesting, 'It is he who must pay the price for original outrages against justice... The result is that he too takes on society's vices, its selfishness, ingratitude, extravagance, and pride. (Hagan, 1954, p. 171-2)" From this perspective, Pip's moral degradation is partly a consequence of the unjust system he enters.

Ultimately, *Great Expectations* confronts the Victorian ideal of social climbing. Dickens critiques not just class inequality, but the myth of transformation itself: the idea that one can simply change one's status without psychic cost. As seen through Pip's story, class transition in the Victorian era is not only an economic leap, but also an area of moral, psychological and cultural conflict. The novel proposes that true growth lies not in ascending the social ladder, but in achieving moral clarity, even if that requires descending economically. This hard-won clarity is evident when Pip cares for the dying Magwitch, stating, "For now my repugnance to [Provis] had all melted away, and in the hunted wounded shackled creature who held my hand in his, I only saw a man who had meant to be my benefactor... I only saw in him a much better man than I had been to Joe" (Dickens, 2008, p. 408).

#### **4. HEATHCLIFF'S VENGEANCE IN *WUTHERING HEIGHTS*: POSSESSION WITHOUT POSITION**

In *Wuthering Heights*, Emily Brontë subverts Victorian conventions of social mobility by depicting Heathcliff's rise not as a process of bourgeois assimilation, but as a vengeful conquest driven by destruction. Although Heathcliff seems like a classic example of class ascension, Emily Brontë eschews the realist conventions of gradual character development. On the contrary, Heathcliff achieves his economic and social rise not through integration into the upper-class, but through destruction and

revenge. In this respect, Heathcliff is a figure who does not internalize the values of the Victorian bourgeoisie but rather disrupts and symbolically punishes them.

Brontë strategically obscures the means of Heathcliff's rise to wealth and power, employing this narrative ambiguity to challenge Victorian notions of social legitimacy and disrupt the developmental trajectory typical of the Bildungsroman. In this respect, Arnold Shapiro claims that: "Emily Brontë admires Heathcliff, but she condemns him when he ruthlessly accepts the values of the people he hates and seeks fulfillment through an empty revenge" (Shapiro, 1969, p. 285). While Brontë describes clearly the abuse Heathcliff suffered at *Wuthering Heights*, she skims over the conditions of his sudden rise in wealth and power and return to *Wuthering Heights*, which casts doubt on the social legitimacy of the character's transformation. Unlike Dickens's Pip, whose internal conflicts are shown by Dickens in detail, Heathcliff's return is shown only by its outcome: he is now rich, powerful, and ready to take revenge. However, one may also argue that the ambiguity of Heathcliff's success serves a purpose, and that it allows Brontë to resist a straightforward story of meritocracy or social assimilation. This implies that Heathcliff's rise is not a process of personal growth and self-discovery, but the birth of an anti-hero through unexplained and probably questionable means.

Moreover, Brontë does not reveal Heathcliff's inner world to the reader directly. His emotions are reflected only indirectly through Nelly Dean's narration. The novel is filtered through layers of narration, primarily through Nelly Dean and Mr. Lockwood, both of whom are unreliable, morally invested, and class-bound. This narrative structure distances the reader from Heathcliff's inner life, which remains inaccessible. With this formal choice, Brontë renders the character development of her antagonist obscure. Heathcliff's wealth, rise in social position, and



control over Thrushcross Grange do not place him within society; they make him powerful without being legitimate, and through this power he subverts the values of the system.

Similarly, Heathcliff's rise in class is not due to the character's desire to integrate into society, but rather because of his desire to overthrow the system in which he is marginalized. His eventual control over the properties of Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross the Grange is not a means of social advancement in the classical sense, but rather a means of symbolic revenge. He controls property, people, and destroys the social fabric of both houses. He does not seek acceptance into the upper-class; he seeks retribution. Heathcliff explicitly states his goal of generational revenge, envisioning, "my descendant fairly lord of their estates: my child hiring their children to till their father's land for wages" (Brontë, 1900, p. 184). He gradually takes control of both Catherine's and her son's lives by taking over Edgar Linton's inheritance. However, this control is not the result of a desire to participate in the bourgeois order, and his behavior is based not on capitalist 'reason', but of a desire to punish the system in his own way.

Heathcliff's path to wealth and power is brutal and does not follow the usual rules of Victorian society. Christopher Heywood's idea that Heathcliff is similar to a "slave turned overseer, slavedriver, and proprietor" (Heywood, 1987, p. 192) helps explain this. This comparison suggests that Heathcliff's ascent mirrors the very system of oppression that once subjugated him. Heathcliff's remark: "The tyrant grinds down his slaves and they don't turn against him; they crush those beneath them" (Brontë, 1900, p. 99) in the novel reveals Heathcliff's belief that the oppressed often turn their pain onto others rather than the original source. It shows how Heathcliff channels his trauma into abuse, targeting those vulnerable like Hareton and Linton, instead of seeking true justice or belonging. When Heathcliff returns to

Wuthering Heights, he appears to have succeeded in resembling a wealthy capitalist. However, this impression collapses quickly. He uses force and trickery to usurp both the Earnshaw and Linton estates. Rather than reflecting actual ambition, entrepreneurship, or hard work, these violent takeovers reveal Heathcliff's intent to dominate rather than coexist. By exercising power through force, Heathcliff reproduces the power structures that once dehumanized him.

Heathcliff's physical appearance is described in various places in the novel with expressions such as "dark", "gypsy-like", "dark-faced". For instance, Lockwood initially observes, "He is a dark-skinned gypsy in aspect, in dress and manners a gentleman" (Brontë, 1900, p. 3). These descriptions show that he is not only class-based but also racially marginalized. Heathcliff is the figure who defines the boundaries of Englishness yet stands outside those boundaries. His racial ambiguity becomes a symbolic marker of his class unfixity: he is neither servant nor son, insider nor outsider.

Heathcliff's relationship with Catherine is not only a love story, but it is also at the center of class trauma. Catherine chooses social security by marrying Edgar Linton; however, her emotional bond with Heathcliff is never severed. In this context, while Catherine chooses the class advancement offered by society, she cannot internally give up the "natural love" represented by Heathcliff. As Catherine herself confesses to Nelly, "It would degrade me to marry Heathcliff now; so he shall never know how I love him; and that, not because he's handsome, Nelly, but because he's more myself than I am" (Brontë, 1900, p. 70). For Heathcliff, Catherine's betrayal is not just a personal break; it is an example of the class ideology that excludes him from the system. "Why did you betray your own heart, Cathy? ... You loved me—then what right had you to leave me? What right—answer me—for the poor fancy you felt for Linton?" (p. 143). After

Catherine's death, Heathcliff begs her to return as a ghost and never leave him wish, which conveys both a gothic mourning and existential anger. This wish is an example of the emotional dimensions of class trauma blended with gothic motifs.

At the end of the novel, Heathcliff's death is not a "punishment" but a self-destruction. Heathcliff is not punished in the conventional sense; nor is he redeemed. His death, like his life, is excessive and uncanny. He gains wealth, power, and control, but dies in utter solitude. For Heathcliff, whose life became a vengeful war against the class system that denied him Catherine, their reunification after death—real or imagined—is an act of resistance. This reunion shows that Heathcliff and Catherine can only be together outside the social and material conditions which originally prohibited their love.

Through the character of Heathcliff, Brontë demonstrates not only the deconstruction of class mobility but also the invalidation of the success/failure dichotomy presented by bourgeois narrative genres. Brontë's treatment of class thus exceeds the boundaries of the realist social novel. She engages with class not as a ladder to be climbed but as a structure to be haunted, transgressed, and destroyed. Heathcliff's wealth does not elevate him socially because the conditions of elevation — race, refinement, legitimacy — are not open to him.

In sum, *Wuthering Heights* offers a portrait of class mobility which is different than *Great Expectations*. While Dickens focuses on moral education and the troubles of cultural mismatch, Brontë symbolically portrays Heathcliff's social exclusion through ambiguities, gaps in the narrative, and the use Gothic elements. Heathcliff's class transition is not a realistic identity construction, but an act of revenge and destruction on a gothic and symbolic level. As a figure who rises but never belongs, Heathcliff challenges the emotional and ideological

boundaries of Victorian society. Unlike Pip's, Heathcliff's story is not about great expectations, but of a deliberate refusal to participate in them.

## **5. MARGARET'S MIDDLE WAY IN *NORTH AND SOUTH*: BRIDGING THE DIVIDE**

*North and South* is a hallmark of what critics have called industrial or condition-of-England novels, which is fiction that engages with the socioeconomic upheavals of the mid-19th century: factory labor, trade unions, urbanization, and the shifting role of women. Where Dickens constructed class conflict as individual trauma and Brontë as gothic revenge and destruction, Gaskell treats it as a way to build bridges. In contrast to the dark, traumatic or chaotic class narratives offered by Dickens or Brontë, *North and South* views social conflicts as solvable problems. Gaskell constructs social mobility as a process of ethical renewal, and not individual tragedy. This effort to build cooperation between classes is based on her characters' being open to understanding, listening to and changing each other.

At the center of this structure in *North and South* is Margaret Hale. She is neither a rising nor a vengeful character, but instead, her class mobility is structured in a relational, moral and transformational way. Margaret's story begins in the pastoral Helstone in the South of England, where she embodies the ideals of classical genteel femininity: grace, charity, deference. Margaret is a young woman of noble but modest birth at the beginning of the novel. However, her father's resignation from his post for religious reasons and their move to the industrial town of Milton cause her to experience not only a geographical but also a cultural and class transition. However, when her family relocates there, Margaret is forced to confront a world in which those ideals have no obvious place. In this respect, Margaret's

mobility is unlike Pip's and Heathcliff's. Theirs is a vertical movement: they move up or down the class hierarchy, while she laterally moves between classes, though not necessarily changing class herself.

Margaret's class influence comes not from her employment or capital, but from her ability to influence others through emotional intelligence and moral authority, which challenges the traditional roles assigned to women in the Victorian era. This situation can be regarded almost as a rebellion against the rigid gender stereotypes and class perception of the period. The roles assigned to women in Victorian society led them to establish their power mostly in the private sphere and through emotional relationships. Margaret both follows and transcends this pattern. She is active not only in the home but also in the street, in the factory yard, and even at the negotiating table. Importantly, Margaret does not assimilate into either class. She does not become a worker, nor does she fully endorse industrial capitalism. Instead, she asserts herself as a moral interlocutor who listens, argues, and influences. This is not a passive sacrifice, but it is an active strategy. Her mobility lies in her capacity to redefine class not as domination but as mutual recognition.

As Nancy D. Mann observes "Margaret Hale is one of the few nineteenth-century heroines who are not only described, but shown as being vitally interested in public questions, and as having and expressing, in equal conversation with men, definite and respect-worthy opinions on these questions" (Mann, 1975, p. 24). Her compassionate relationships with workers such as Nicholas Higgins, her capacity to transform boss figures such as John Thornton, demonstrate the effectiveness of her moral influence. Margaret's most complex relationship is with Milton's powerful manufacturer, John Thornton. Their relationship is initially confrontational: Margaret criticizes Thornton's harsh treatment of the workers, while Thornton thinks Margaret is

ignorant of the realities of life. This ideological divide is clear in early conversations, such as when Thornton extols the system allowing workers like himself to rise: “It is one of the great beauties of our system, that a working-man may raise himself into the power and position of a master by his own exertions.”, which prompts Margaret's sharp query, “You consider all who are unsuccessful... as your enemies, then...?” to which Thornton retorts, “As their own enemies, certainly” (Gaskell, 1994, p. 84). Thornton's attitude towards the workers begins to change with Margaret's influence. This internal change, signifying a deeper appreciation for Margaret herself, is later symbolized at the end of the novel, by his revelation that he secretly visited her former home “to see the place where Margaret grew to what she is” (Gaskell, 1994, 436) and kept dried roses from Helstone. As John Paul Kanwit suggests, this internal change has external consequences: “Thornton's more complex mode of perception—demonstrated through his presentation of the Helstone roses—will enable him to create productive dialogues with workers rather than polarizing stereotypes” (Kanwit, 2009, p. 208). Thornton's changing views on labor relations emerge through Margaret's influence, but this is not a one-sided transformation: Margaret also questions her own prejudices, evidenced by her earlier assertion, “I don't like shoppy people. I think we are far better off knowing only cottagers and labourers, and people without pretence... I'm sure you don't want me to admire butchers and bakers, and candlestick-makers, do you, mamma?” (Gaskell, 1994, p. 19). Gaskell thus models social change not through conquest but through transformation. As a result, class mobility is experienced not only in material conditions but also in the ideological positions of the characters in *North and South*.

As opposed to Pip or Heathcliff, Margaret neither acquires wealth nor moves up the social ladder. However, at the end of the novel, she unexpectedly inherits an inheritance after the death of

her father and cousin. Yet Gaskell refuses to present Margaret as a passive recipient of such security. Her inheritance, which allows her to become a financial partner in Thornton's mill, positions her not as a romantic heroine being saved, but as an active agent in shaping economic and social outcomes. Pamela Corpron Parker suggests this reflects a shift in Gaskell's vision: "By 1854 and the publication of *North and South*, Gaskell's confidence in a peculiarly female form of social reform, of women's benevolent influence and their individual acts of charity, had weakened. She experimented instead with institutional solutions, with the image of women working alongside men to consolidate the interests of industry and philanthropy" (Parker, 1997, p. 330). More importantly, the way she uses this inheritance makes her an economic subject. Her investment in Thornton's failing factory is a sign not only of love but also of economic partnership. Rather than climb the social ladder, she reshapes her position within it by becoming an economic actor alongside male industrialists.

Additionally, Margaret's success in navigating class tensions is intimately tied to her resistance to being consumed by either sentimentality or cynicism. She does not idealize the working class, nor does she demonize capital. She sees complexity, ambiguity, and suffering on all sides. Kay Millard observes this nuanced portrayal in Gaskell's treatment of workers: "Always, but particularly in *Mary Barton* and *North and South*, they [characters at the lower end of the social scale] are treated as fully rounded human beings. Their customs are respected; their language is used as part of their own culture, rather than as any attempt to patronise them by suggesting that they have not been taught to speak properly" (Millard, 2001, p. 11). This refusal to simplify social reality is a hallmark of Gaskell's realism and a key reason why *North and South* remains a vital text in the study of Victorian class politics.

As seen in this section, the class transition represented by Margaret is characterized by moral solidity, dialogue, and reformist idealism, as opposed to Pip's emotional fragmentation or Heathcliff's angry destructiveness. Supporting this view, Sarah Dredge argues that: "The dominant vehicle of both plot and theme in the novel is conversation... It is through lengthy debates and personal confrontations within the wider social environment that the central characters come to greater understanding, which culminates in the revision of industrial and social practices" (Dredge, 2012, p. 93). Furthermore, Carol A. Martin suggests such adaptability is key to survival within the novel's framework: "Without adaptability, with reliance only on a source of power outside oneself, or in the absence of such authority, having nothing to rely on, one is doomed. Those characters who have within themselves the strength to adapt will survive..." (Martin, 1983, p. 99). Thus, Gaskell's novel does not show class change as something that just happens. Instead, it presents it as a duty, and as something people must work for.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Having examined the trajectories of Pip in *Great Expectations*, Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights*, and Margaret Hale in *North and South*, one can now synthesize how these three characters present class mobility in distinct but connected ways. What emerges from this comparison is that social ascent in Victorian literature is never purely economic, but it is deeply entangled with questions of identity, genre, gender, and symbolic belonging to a class. Class mobility, in other words, is not simply about where characters go in society, but how they feel, act, and are perceived as they try to get there.

In Dickens's realist framework, Pip's journey can be read as an aspirational and economic climb framed through the lens of



the *Bildungsroman*. However, the outcome is not a triumphant resolution but a return to moral humility. Pip's narrative represents a failure of internalization. He gains wealth but never the embodied practices of the class he aspires to. As Bourdieu would frame it, Pip lacks the *habitus* of the elite, and this mismatch results in symbolic failure. His sense of dislocation aligns with Peter Blau's claim that "mobile persons are not well integrated in either class... their behavior is expected to be intermediate between the classes" (Blau, 1956, p. 292). Pip fails not because he lacks money, but because he overcommits to the ceremonial aspects of gentility while missing its informal, internalized values. Dickens dramatizes this failure as a kind of tragic misreading, wherein education and refinement are insufficient to guarantee true acceptance or emotional fulfillment.

By contrast, Heathcliff's path in *Wuthering Heights* reflects symbolic mobility driven not by economic ambition but by emotional vengeance. His social rise lacks moral and narrative resolution. In the Gothic genre, Heathcliff's transgression of class boundaries is not assimilative but destructive. As Daenekindt and Roose note, socially mobile individuals often perform conformity in public while retaining internal dissonance: "In the public sphere, individuals who are socially mobile display greater alignment with the norms of their destination class" (Daenekindt & Roose, 2013, p. 313). Yet Heathcliff does not perform — he disrupts. Heathcliff exists in a state of symbolic vengeance, never integration. Although he attains material wealth, his social rejection transforms into hostility and control. Heathcliff's orientation toward status, not his wealth per se, fuels his obsessive revenge. His behavior aligns with Blau's theory that upward mobility without new social ties leads to isolation: "Mobile persons are not well integrated in either class... their behavior is expected to be intermediate between the classes" (Blau, 1956, p. 292). This situation of being neither accepted above nor below

becomes a ground for emotional volatility and narrative breakdown.

Gaskell's *North and South* offers a contrasting case in Margaret Hale, whose class movement is not marked by rupture but by negotiation. Her trajectory does not conform to the traditional model of mobility through acquisition or dominance, but rather through relational transformation. Margaret's success stems from what Turner calls the ability to navigate "ceremonial" and "working" values — the internal and external codes of class — without mistaking one for the other (Turner, 1964, p. 360). Through empathy and dialogue, she achieves moving across class lines without emotional fragmentation. Where Pip is self-fragmented and Heathcliff alienated, Margaret models a negotiated passage that neither disowns the past nor fetishizes the future. She retains her loyalty to working-class suffering even as she moves into a bourgeois social position. Gaskell's narrative rewards this synthesis, not with complete social power, but with relational legitimacy: a union with Thornton that is both symbolic and economic.

In the end, Victorian novels don't show social mobility as simply climbing a ladder. Instead, they show it as something people have to manage and make sense of emotionally, socially, and symbolically. What really matters is not how high the characters rise, but how they understand and deal with what that rise means. Thus, the narrative outcomes differ not only by genre but by the psychological and social architectures behind each character. Pip collapses under cultural mismatch; Heathcliff explodes from symbolic rage; Margaret integrates through moral transformation. In short, social mobility in Victorian literature cannot be read as a unidirectional climb. Rather, it is a test of whether internal transformation can match external ascent, whether characters can achieve not just new roles but new ways of being. The Victorian novel becomes a laboratory for this

experiment, exposing not only the hopes of mobility but also its psychic and symbolic limits.

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# **BECOMING THE BOURGEOIS: CLASS MOBILITY, ALIENATION, AND IDENTITY IN *GREAT EXPECTATIONS*, *WUTHERING HEIGHTS*, AND *NORTH AND SOUTH***

**Şafak NEDİCEYUVA<sup>1</sup>**

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The Victorian era was a period of industrialization and urbanization, and consequently, a period of unprecedented reshaping of the class structures and traditional social hierarchies for the British. Migration from rural to urban areas, the restructuring of the working class, acquisition of economic and cultural dominance by the middle class, and the gradual dissolution of the aristocracy all found strong echoes in the literature of the period. In this context, class mobility, especially one's social transition from the lower classes to the upper classes, becomes one of the most prominent themes of Victorian society and its literature. Hartmut Kaelble argues that: "this period now seems to be characterized by restricted social mobility rather than by a spectacular increase in the rate of mobility" (Kaelble, 1948, p. 491). According to him, contrary to common assumptions, "it seems more appropriate to regard it as a period of crisis for important strata of society rather than as a golden age of high social mobility with opportunities open to all talents" (p. 494). Reading Kaelble's arguments leads us to believe that Victorian writers exaggerated or overrepresented the frequency of social

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movement between classes. While Kaelble highlights constraints on social mobility, Long shows considerable movement was happening. His article notes that “mobility rates were substantially greater than has been previously estimated, to the extent that mobility in the 1850s was only slightly less than in the 1970s (Long, 2013, p. 1)”. While the disagreement between Kaelble and Long makes social ascent in Victorian England a topic of Sociology, this article attempts to shift the focus to literature and argues that such instances of individual economic betterment are not only personal success stories but also accounts of rupture and trauma in terms of identity, belonging, and morality.

What happens when one acquires wealth without the cultural capital to match it? For the individual and the society, the possibility of “rising above one’s station” creates optimism and anxiety at the same time, as it entails betterment for the individual, while simultaneously threatening to subvert traditional identities and values. Victorian literature functioned as both a mirror and an ideological engine for this anxiety. In Victorian fiction, the movement of characters between classes often heralds not only a social transition but also an internal transformation, even disintegration. In these narratives of ascent, which were occasionally triumphant, sometimes tragic, and mostly ambivalent; characters are often forced to distance themselves from their own origins and they invite us to ask: What does it mean to move “up” in a society that polices belonging to a social class? Most of the time, as characters attempt to learn the language, manners, and values of classes to which they do not belong, they both stay alien to the new class and lose touch with their old world. Thus, Victorian fiction explores whether new identities can be forged, or if they are doomed to collapse under the weight of old loyalties.

This article aims to examine how upward class mobility was represented in three landmark Victorian novels: Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations* (1861), Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847) and Elizabeth Gaskell *North and South* (1855) through the lenses of Marxist literary criticism and a discussion of the novel genre. I argue that class ascension in these works is rarely triumphant; instead, it is fraught with identity crises and cultural alienation. Each text addresses the phenomenon of upward social mobility, but through different narrative forms, ideological commitments, and character trajectories. These three novels deal with the theme of class transition in different contexts, revealing in different ways the emotional and moral dimensions of the social transformation experienced by the characters. Therefore, genre is a determining force in how Victorian novels construct the experience and consequences of class mobility.

In *Great Expectations*, Dickens shows the fragmentations of the individual. His use of realism and the Bildungsroman structure positions class transition as a personal failure of assimilation. Pip's shame and alienation during his childhood fuels his desire to be a member of the upper class, yet his economic achievements are not enough to erase his class origins. While Pip's class mobility is intertwined with the narrative of individual progress drawn by the realist Bildungsroman genre, it ultimately negates the promise of the genre because of his alienation.

Meanwhile, in *Wuthering Heights*, Heathcliff's upwards class mobility occurs under mysterious conditions, and the narrative focuses not on his emotional and cultural transformation, but on the final result this transformation. Heathcliff's class transition is not an effort to assimilate into gentry society but to destroy it from within. Brontë's Gothic form, by contrast, resists such a Realist approach, rendering class as a symbolic force. By shaping the story with the tools of the Gothic,



the novel presents its antagonist's journey of exclusion and revenge in a symbolic and violent, rather than a Realist way.

Conversely, Gaskell offers a third model, one that imagines class boundaries as penetrable and reformable, and shows the opportunities presented by empathy. Unlike Pip and Heathcliff, Margaret Hale in Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* does not "rise" between classes, but rather, she is a mediator between them. Her character brings classes together by promoting dialogue and reform. Here, class movement happens not on an economic, but on a moral level, offering a vision of class transition through mutual transformation rather than trauma.

## **2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

In this respect, the study will handle the topic of class mobility in Victorian fiction not only thematically, but also as an ideological axis upon which narrative discourses are established. This article establishes an analytical foundation by combining Marxist literary criticism, and a discussion of the novel genre. It proceeds in three sections, where each novel character— Pip, Heathcliff and Margaret—will be examined in detail within the relevant genre contexts; followed by a comparative synthesis that traces the role of literary form in representing social movement, seeking a full assessment of the costs and limits of "becoming bourgeois" in Victorian literature.

At the heart of this inquiry lies Marxist literary criticism, a tradition that foregrounds the material and ideological conditions under which literature is produced. As mentioned, Marxist theory treats literature as a product of the historical-social context in which it is produced. Literature is not only a passive mirror of class structures, but also a field in which the unconscious ideological representations of these structures take shape. In this context, the Victorian novel becomes a platform on

which class shifts, conflicts and identifications that emerged under the influence of capitalist transformation are staged. Marxist literary critics claim literary texts both reflect and reproduce the relations of production in which they take place. Thus, novels, especially realist ones, function as both products and critiques of the class structures they depict. Novels can be considered not only as reflectors of social change, but also as works that give meaning to, legitimize, or question this change. In *Marxism and Literary Criticism*, Eagleton asserts that “Art, then, is for Marxism part of the ‘superstructure’ of society”, and that “literary works are not mysteriously inspired, or explicable simply in terms of their authors’ psychology” (Eagleton, 2003, p. 5). Examining Victorian novels in the context of class mobility requires questioning not only individual destinies or narrative plots, but also the ideological function of literature. In the context of upward social mobility, as seen in these novels, climbing the social ladder is synonymous with anxiety, blunder, alienation, and guilt.

To consider the issue of class solely on the level of economic capital would be to ignore the cultural and symbolic dimensions of upward mobility. This is where Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of cultural capital and habitus come into play. Bourdieu states in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* that individuals need not only money but also certain social skills, tastes and bodily postures in order to maintain or change their class position (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 91). Class operates not only through material resources but through codes of behavior, language, and aesthetic taste— what he calls “habitus” (p. 6). These characteristics determine whether the individual is considered legitimate in the social sphere.

This conceptual framework is extremely functional in terms of understanding Pip's psychological collapse in *Great Expectations*. Although Pip approaches the upper class

economically, he cannot internalize their cultural codes. The formal characteristics of the novel genre directly affect how it represents class mobility. For example, one can expect that in the realist Bildungsroman style, the protagonist's journey will follow a linear path of maturation and self-discovery. However, this form does not always present a success story as Dickens subverts these expectations of the genre and focuses on the emotional cost of mobility. We can see that Pip's journey conforms to this structure, but that Dickens subverts the Bildungsroman genre's promise of individual betterment by exposing the emotional cost of class mobility.

In contrast to Dickens' realism, Brontë's Gothic style explores class on the level of internalized traumas, symbols, and fears. In *Wuthering Heights*, although Heathcliff's rise in class is central to the narrative, this movement is never explained realistically. Instead, the narrative is shaped by violence, death, ghosts, and emotional extremes. His refusal to culturally assimilate into the upper-class behaviours becomes a stand against the class system that marginalized him as a child.

A different genre, what we might call reformist realism, can be seen in Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*. Gaskell's style treats class conflicts not as absolute oppositions but as potential for dialogue and transformation. Margaret Hale's mediation between opposing social classes represents the central ethical stance of her reformist realism. The novel is a clear example of the 19<sup>th</sup> century "condition-of-England" literature, which seeks to portray the conflict between capital and the working class, urban and rural, the modern and the traditional. Unlike Pip, Gaskell's Margaret Hale neither collapses under the pressure of social difference, nor does she return to destroy those who rejected her like Heathcliff. Instead, she mediates between classes, negotiating solidarity with workers (Higgins) and empathy with capitalists (Thornton). This social mediation is

made possible by her feminine ethical competence. The female character's power to reform cannot be effective without questioning the cultural production of gender roles. Thus, gender is both a possibility and a delimiter in the representation of class mobility. Gaskell's narrative suggests that dialogue can enable social mobility without isolation.

When these theoretical approaches are considered together, it is seen that the Victorian novel portrays class transition never purely as an economic or individual incident, but as a cultural act, a narrative event, and an ideological battleground. Thus, while Victorian Britain presents the individual with the means to achieve economic freedom, literature of the period usually captures the cultural and ideological crises entailed with it. Accordingly, the Victorian novel becomes a stage for exploring this crisis.

### **3. PIP'S RISE AND FALL IN *GREAT EXPECTATIONS*: BELONGING NOWHERE**

While Charles Dickens explores in *David Copperfield* the difficulty of an unexpected fall into the working class, *Great Expectations* attempts the opposite: the perils of a sudden rise in social status. In Victorian fiction, class mobility is not simply a matter of changing social position; it is also a site of identity conflict which comes with an emotional cost. In *Great Expectations* (1861), the class shame experienced by the protagonist Pip in his childhood initiates a process that directs his entire life and leads to disintegration. Dickens creates Pip's journey as a story from humble beginnings as an orphan to a gentleman in the capital of the British Empire. Pip's desire for upward mobility brings him both material gain and emotional collapse. *Great Expectations* associates Pip's ambition to join the upper-class with an ambition for status and wealth, and his aim is

not to be a better person, but to be better off. Therefore, Pip's failure to realistically represent the class he enters shows Dickens's uncertainty about the promises of modernity and bourgeois society.

Pip's class awareness is evident in his childhood as it begins with Pip meeting Estella at Miss Havisham's house. Estella's crushing comments are the starting point of Pip's shame: "He calls the knaves Jacks, this boy!" said Estella with disdain, before our first game was out. "And what coarse hands he has! And what thick boots!" (Dickens, 2008, p. 55). This scene shows that Estella, while she is not a member of the true aristocracy, holds what Pierre Bourdieu would call cultural capital. Even if she is not socially aristocratic, she has internalized the manners, language, and behaviors of that class. As Pierre Bourdieu explains in his *Distinction*, cultural capital is measured not just by what you have, but by how you talk, how you look, how you act (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 13). Pip's feeling of being incomplete by these criteria sends him into a lifelong cycle of alienation.

From that point forward, Pip's desire to transform his identity is driven by his unending desire to become worthy in Estella's eyes, but in this process, he becomes ashamed of his past and alienated from the realities of the class he tries to belong to. Pip's discomfort mirrors Peter M. Blau's concept of "mobility dilemmas," wherein interpersonal integration becomes difficult as the mobile individual becomes a marginal figure (Blau, 1956, p. 290). Pip's obsessive love for Estella is not only an individual but also a class fetishization. Estella is more than just his object of desire; she is a concrete symbol of class advancement.

When an anonymous sponsor bestows upon him a fortune (which Pip mistakenly believes comes from Miss Havisham), he is transported to London to begin his transformation. But this transformation is not one of substance; it is theatrical. Pip reflects

on his internal state, noting: "As Joe and Biddy became more at their cheerful ease again, I became quite gloomy. Dissatisfied with my fortune, of course I could not be; but it is possible that I may have been, without quite knowing it, dissatisfied with myself" (Dickens, 2008, p. 131). Alan Lelchuk describes Pip's decline during this period: "Gradually he acquires a costumed, powdered self, glorying in self-gratification, studied sloth, gluttonous immorality. The process of dehumanization parallels the ascendancy of the aristocratic prig; as he moves up the social ladder, he sinks lower on the human. (Lelchuk, 1970, p. 410)". This adoption of a superficial identity marks the beginning of the moral degradation and alienation central to his experience. His newfound status quickly leads to condescension, as Pip recounts: "As I passed the church, I felt...a sublime compassion for the poor creatures who were destined to go there... I promised myself that I would do something for them... and formed a plan... for bestowing a dinner... a pint of ale, and a gallon of condescension upon everybody in the village" (Dickens, 2008, p. 133).

Pip adopts the lifestyle of a gentleman, hiring a servant and acquiring fine clothes. Yet, he is constantly haunted by the ghosts of his past. The shame Pip experiences, especially during his blacksmith brother-in-law Joe Gargery's visit to London, is the most visible form of class anxiety. Pip thinks: "If I could have kept him away by paying money, I certainly would have paid money" (Dickens, 2008, p. 199). Thus, Pip's moral compass falters as his desire for social acceptance overtakes his loyalty to those who shaped him. Joe, with quiet dignity, perceives the divide, explaining to Pip upon his departure, "...life is made of ever so many partings welded together... Divisions among such must come, and must be met as they come... You and me is not two figures to be together in London... I'm wrong in these clothes. I'm wrong out of the forge, the kitchen, or off th' meshes..." (Dickens, 2008, p. 205).

Pip's reaction to Joe's arrival illustrates an effect Dickens associated with class consciousness. Masao Hasegawa notes Dickens's concern that aspirations for upward mobility would incite working-class people to belittle and feel contempt for their fellows and for themselves, which would lead to dissonance within their own class. (Hasegawa, 2021, p. 311-2)". Pip's desire for acceptance into the upper class thus creates a contempt for his actual class condition, which contributes to his moral faltering. Later, Pip feels guilty for having treated Joe and Biddy with contempt and anxiety, fearing they would hinder his rise in society. However, his guilt doesn't lead him to treat them any better: it only leaves him paralyzed and passive, so it offers no real redemption.

Pip's fantasizing about Miss Havisham as the owner of the fortune that is the engine of Pip's class advancement shows his need to romanticize his own success. But the truth is very different: the source of the fortune is Magwitch, a convict whom he rescued in the past, when he was not even a stranger, and who was ostracized by society. This revelation is the collapse of the fantasy that Pip has constructed about himself and society: "The abhorrence in which I held the man, the dread I had of him, the repugnance with which I shrank from him, could not have been exceeded if he had been some terrible beast" (Dickens, 2008, p. 292). This connection to the criminal underworld haunts Pip, who feels: "how strange it was that I should be encompassed by all this taint of prison and crime... that it should have reappeared on two occasions... that it should in this new way pervade my fortune and advancement" (Dickens, 2008, p. 241). This discovery exposes the moral contradictions of Victorian society: while society encourages individuals to be meritocratic, these individuals are not considered legitimate without forgetting their origins. Pip's wealth is not considered legitimate because it comes from someone the system has excluded —not by society, nor by Pip

himself. This aligns with Blau's notion of the "marginal man," who becomes "out of tune with others both in their new and original strata in the occupational hierarchy." Peter M. Blau further asserts that "the dilemmas faced by mobile individuals in their interpersonal relations inhibit social integration" (Blau, 1956, p. 290). Pip's inability to feel at home in London society reflects exactly this inhibited integration. Pip's discomfort among London's aristocracy and his eventual return to the authenticity of the lower-class is an example of his mismatches between economic and cultural mobility. Pip adopts the outward rituals of the upper class — manners, dress, demeanor — but "mistakes ceremonial for working values," failing to grasp the more practical, unwritten social behaviors required for true belonging. As Turner warns, "the upwardly mobile person is likely to impair his chances of attaining the success that he values by his overly rigid internalization of putative middle-class values" (Turner, 1956, p. 362).

*Great Expectations* begins formally as a Bildungsroman, or a coming-of-age novel. The Bildungsroman typically charts a protagonist's development into social maturity, aligning personal growth with social integration. However, Dickens questions the traditional structure of this genre. The Bildungsroman envisions the character finding his place within the social system; but Pip's maturity occurs not by entering the system but by exiting it. When he loses his fortune and returns to Joe and his home, he finally develops an ethical awareness. Dickens deconstructs the Bildungsroman form by making Pip's development a result of his failure. The novel offers no stable model of class assimilation; instead, it suggests that the very attempt to become someone else results in fracture. However, Pip's snobbery and failing personality can be seen as more than just personal weaknesses resulting from his aspirations. John H. Hagan argues in his "The Poor Labyrinth: The Theme of Social Injustice in Dickens's



'*Great Expectations*'" that Pip is fundamentally a victim of broader societal ills, suggesting, 'It is he who must pay the price for original outrages against justice... The result is that he too takes on society's vices, its selfishness, ingratitude, extravagance, and pride. (Hagan, 1954, p. 171-2)" From this perspective, Pip's moral degradation is partly a consequence of the unjust system he enters.

Ultimately, *Great Expectations* confronts the Victorian ideal of social climbing. Dickens critiques not just class inequality, but the myth of transformation itself: the idea that one can simply change one's status without psychic cost. As seen through Pip's story, class transition in the Victorian era is not only an economic leap, but also an area of moral, psychological and cultural conflict. The novel proposes that true growth lies not in ascending the social ladder, but in achieving moral clarity, even if that requires descending economically. This hard-won clarity is evident when Pip cares for the dying Magwitch, stating, "For now my repugnance to [Provis] had all melted away, and in the hunted wounded shackled creature who held my hand in his, I only saw a man who had meant to be my benefactor... I only saw in him a much better man than I had been to Joe" (Dickens, 2008, p. 408).

#### **4. HEATHCLIFF'S VENGEANCE IN *WUTHERING HEIGHTS*: POSSESSION WITHOUT POSITION**

In *Wuthering Heights*, Emily Brontë subverts Victorian conventions of social mobility by depicting Heathcliff's rise not as a process of bourgeois assimilation, but as a vengeful conquest driven by destruction. Although Heathcliff seems like a classic example of class ascension, Emily Brontë eschews the realist conventions of gradual character development. On the contrary, Heathcliff achieves his economic and social rise not through integration into the upper-class, but through destruction and

revenge. In this respect, Heathcliff is a figure who does not internalize the values of the Victorian bourgeoisie but rather disrupts and symbolically punishes them.

Brontë strategically obscures the means of Heathcliff's rise to wealth and power, employing this narrative ambiguity to challenge Victorian notions of social legitimacy and disrupt the developmental trajectory typical of the Bildungsroman. In this respect, Arnold Shapiro claims that: "Emily Brontë admires Heathcliff, but she condemns him when he ruthlessly accepts the values of the people he hates and seeks fulfillment through an empty revenge" (Shapiro, 1969, p. 285). While Brontë describes clearly the abuse Heathcliff suffered at *Wuthering Heights*, she skims over the conditions of his sudden rise in wealth and power and return to *Wuthering Heights*, which casts doubt on the social legitimacy of the character's transformation. Unlike Dickens's Pip, whose internal conflicts are shown by Dickens in detail, Heathcliff's return is shown only by its outcome: he is now rich, powerful, and ready to take revenge. However, one may also argue that the ambiguity of Heathcliff's success serves a purpose, and that it allows Brontë to resist a straightforward story of meritocracy or social assimilation. This implies that Heathcliff's rise is not a process of personal growth and self-discovery, but the birth of an anti-hero through unexplained and probably questionable means.

Moreover, Brontë does not reveal Heathcliff's inner world to the reader directly. His emotions are reflected only indirectly through Nelly Dean's narration. The novel is filtered through layers of narration, primarily through Nelly Dean and Mr. Lockwood, both of whom are unreliable, morally invested, and class-bound. This narrative structure distances the reader from Heathcliff's inner life, which remains inaccessible. With this formal choice, Brontë renders the character development of her antagonist obscure. Heathcliff's wealth, rise in social position, and

control over Thrushcross Grange do not place him within society; they make him powerful without being legitimate, and through this power he subverts the values of the system.

Similarly, Heathcliff's rise in class is not due to the character's desire to integrate into society, but rather because of his desire to overthrow the system in which he is marginalized. His eventual control over the properties of Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross the Grange is not a means of social advancement in the classical sense, but rather a means of symbolic revenge. He controls property, people, and destroys the social fabric of both houses. He does not seek acceptance into the upper-class; he seeks retribution. Heathcliff explicitly states his goal of generational revenge, envisioning, "my descendant fairly lord of their estates: my child hiring their children to till their father's land for wages" (Brontë, 1900, p. 184). He gradually takes control of both Catherine's and her son's lives by taking over Edgar Linton's inheritance. However, this control is not the result of a desire to participate in the bourgeois order, and his behavior is based not on capitalist 'reason', but of a desire to punish the system in his own way.

Heathcliff's path to wealth and power is brutal and does not follow the usual rules of Victorian society. Christopher Heywood's idea that Heathcliff is similar to a "slave turned overseer, slavedriver, and proprietor" (Heywood, 1987, p. 192) helps explain this. This comparison suggests that Heathcliff's ascent mirrors the very system of oppression that once subjugated him. Heathcliff's remark: "The tyrant grinds down his slaves and they don't turn against him; they crush those beneath them" (Brontë, 1900, p. 99) in the novel reveals Heathcliff's belief that the oppressed often turn their pain onto others rather than the original source. It shows how Heathcliff channels his trauma into abuse, targeting those vulnerable like Hareton and Linton, instead of seeking true justice or belonging. When Heathcliff returns to

Wuthering Heights, he appears to have succeeded in resembling a wealthy capitalist. However, this impression collapses quickly. He uses force and trickery to usurp both the Earnshaw and Linton estates. Rather than reflecting actual ambition, entrepreneurship, or hard work, these violent takeovers reveal Heathcliff's intent to dominate rather than coexist. By exercising power through force, Heathcliff reproduces the power structures that once dehumanized him.

Heathcliff's physical appearance is described in various places in the novel with expressions such as "dark", "gypsy-like", "dark-faced". For instance, Lockwood initially observes, "He is a dark-skinned gypsy in aspect, in dress and manners a gentleman" (Brontë, 1900, p. 3). These descriptions show that he is not only class-based but also racially marginalized. Heathcliff is the figure who defines the boundaries of Englishness yet stands outside those boundaries. His racial ambiguity becomes a symbolic marker of his class unfixity: he is neither servant nor son, insider nor outsider.

Heathcliff's relationship with Catherine is not only a love story, but it is also at the center of class trauma. Catherine chooses social security by marrying Edgar Linton; however, her emotional bond with Heathcliff is never severed. In this context, while Catherine chooses the class advancement offered by society, she cannot internally give up the "natural love" represented by Heathcliff. As Catherine herself confesses to Nelly, "It would degrade me to marry Heathcliff now; so he shall never know how I love him; and that, not because he's handsome, Nelly, but because he's more myself than I am" (Brontë, 1900, p. 70). For Heathcliff, Catherine's betrayal is not just a personal break; it is an example of the class ideology that excludes him from the system. "Why did you betray your own heart, Cathy? ... You loved me—then what right had you to leave me? What right—answer me—for the poor fancy you felt for Linton?" (p. 143). After

Catherine's death, Heathcliff begs her to return as a ghost and never leave him wish, which conveys both a gothic mourning and existential anger. This wish is an example of the emotional dimensions of class trauma blended with gothic motifs.

At the end of the novel, Heathcliff's death is not a "punishment" but a self-destruction. Heathcliff is not punished in the conventional sense; nor is he redeemed. His death, like his life, is excessive and uncanny. He gains wealth, power, and control, but dies in utter solitude. For Heathcliff, whose life became a vengeful war against the class system that denied him Catherine, their reunification after death—real or imagined—is an act of resistance. This reunion shows that Heathcliff and Catherine can only be together outside the social and material conditions which originally prohibited their love.

Through the character of Heathcliff, Brontë demonstrates not only the deconstruction of class mobility but also the invalidation of the success/failure dichotomy presented by bourgeois narrative genres. Brontë's treatment of class thus exceeds the boundaries of the realist social novel. She engages with class not as a ladder to be climbed but as a structure to be haunted, transgressed, and destroyed. Heathcliff's wealth does not elevate him socially because the conditions of elevation — race, refinement, legitimacy — are not open to him.

In sum, *Wuthering Heights* offers a portrait of class mobility which is different than *Great Expectations*. While Dickens focuses on moral education and the troubles of cultural mismatch, Brontë symbolically portrays Heathcliff's social exclusion through ambiguities, gaps in the narrative, and the use Gothic elements. Heathcliff's class transition is not a realistic identity construction, but an act of revenge and destruction on a gothic and symbolic level. As a figure who rises but never belongs, Heathcliff challenges the emotional and ideological

boundaries of Victorian society. Unlike Pip's, Heathcliff's story is not about great expectations, but of a deliberate refusal to participate in them.

## **5. MARGARET'S MIDDLE WAY IN *NORTH AND SOUTH*: BRIDGING THE DIVIDE**

*North and South* is a hallmark of what critics have called industrial or condition-of-England novels, which is fiction that engages with the socioeconomic upheavals of the mid-19th century: factory labor, trade unions, urbanization, and the shifting role of women. Where Dickens constructed class conflict as individual trauma and Brontë as gothic revenge and destruction, Gaskell treats it as a way to build bridges. In contrast to the dark, traumatic or chaotic class narratives offered by Dickens or Brontë, *North and South* views social conflicts as solvable problems. Gaskell constructs social mobility as a process of ethical renewal, and not individual tragedy. This effort to build cooperation between classes is based on her characters' being open to understanding, listening to and changing each other.

At the center of this structure in *North and South* is Margaret Hale. She is neither a rising nor a vengeful character, but instead, her class mobility is structured in a relational, moral and transformational way. Margaret's story begins in the pastoral Helstone in the South of England, where she embodies the ideals of classical genteel femininity: grace, charity, deference. Margaret is a young woman of noble but modest birth at the beginning of the novel. However, her father's resignation from his post for religious reasons and their move to the industrial town of Milton cause her to experience not only a geographical but also a cultural and class transition. However, when her family relocates there, Margaret is forced to confront a world in which those ideals have no obvious place. In this respect, Margaret's

mobility is unlike Pip's and Heathcliff's. Theirs is a vertical movement: they move up or down the class hierarchy, while she laterally moves between classes, though not necessarily changing class herself.

Margaret's class influence comes not from her employment or capital, but from her ability to influence others through emotional intelligence and moral authority, which challenges the traditional roles assigned to women in the Victorian era. This situation can be regarded almost as a rebellion against the rigid gender stereotypes and class perception of the period. The roles assigned to women in Victorian society led them to establish their power mostly in the private sphere and through emotional relationships. Margaret both follows and transcends this pattern. She is active not only in the home but also in the street, in the factory yard, and even at the negotiating table. Importantly, Margaret does not assimilate into either class. She does not become a worker, nor does she fully endorse industrial capitalism. Instead, she asserts herself as a moral interlocutor who listens, argues, and influences. This is not a passive sacrifice, but it is an active strategy. Her mobility lies in her capacity to redefine class not as domination but as mutual recognition.

As Nancy D. Mann observes "Margaret Hale is one of the few nineteenth-century heroines who are not only described, but shown as being vitally interested in public questions, and as having and expressing, in equal conversation with men, definite and respect-worthy opinions on these questions" (Mann, 1975, p. 24). Her compassionate relationships with workers such as Nicholas Higgins, her capacity to transform boss figures such as John Thornton, demonstrate the effectiveness of her moral influence. Margaret's most complex relationship is with Milton's powerful manufacturer, John Thornton. Their relationship is initially confrontational: Margaret criticizes Thornton's harsh treatment of the workers, while Thornton thinks Margaret is

ignorant of the realities of life. This ideological divide is clear in early conversations, such as when Thornton extols the system allowing workers like himself to rise: “It is one of the great beauties of our system, that a working-man may raise himself into the power and position of a master by his own exertions.”, which prompts Margaret's sharp query, “You consider all who are unsuccessful... as your enemies, then...?” to which Thornton retorts, “As their own enemies, certainly” (Gaskell, 1994, p. 84). Thornton's attitude towards the workers begins to change with Margaret's influence. This internal change, signifying a deeper appreciation for Margaret herself, is later symbolized at the end of the novel, by his revelation that he secretly visited her former home “to see the place where Margaret grew to what she is” (Gaskell, 1994, 436) and kept dried roses from Helstone. As John Paul Kanwit suggests, this internal change has external consequences: “Thornton's more complex mode of perception—demonstrated through his presentation of the Helstone roses—will enable him to create productive dialogues with workers rather than polarizing stereotypes” (Kanwit, 2009, p. 208). Thornton's changing views on labor relations emerge through Margaret's influence, but this is not a one-sided transformation: Margaret also questions her own prejudices, evidenced by her earlier assertion, “I don't like shoppy people. I think we are far better off knowing only cottagers and labourers, and people without pretence... I'm sure you don't want me to admire butchers and bakers, and candlestick-makers, do you, mamma?” (Gaskell, 1994, p. 19). Gaskell thus models social change not through conquest but through transformation. As a result, class mobility is experienced not only in material conditions but also in the ideological positions of the characters in *North and South*.

As opposed to Pip or Heathcliff, Margaret neither acquires wealth nor moves up the social ladder. However, at the end of the novel, she unexpectedly inherits an inheritance after the death of



her father and cousin. Yet Gaskell refuses to present Margaret as a passive recipient of such security. Her inheritance, which allows her to become a financial partner in Thornton's mill, positions her not as a romantic heroine being saved, but as an active agent in shaping economic and social outcomes. Pamela Corpron Parker suggests this reflects a shift in Gaskell's vision: "By 1854 and the publication of *North and South*, Gaskell's confidence in a peculiarly female form of social reform, of women's benevolent influence and their individual acts of charity, had weakened. She experimented instead with institutional solutions, with the image of women working alongside men to consolidate the interests of industry and philanthropy" (Parker, 1997, p. 330). More importantly, the way she uses this inheritance makes her an economic subject. Her investment in Thornton's failing factory is a sign not only of love but also of economic partnership. Rather than climb the social ladder, she reshapes her position within it by becoming an economic actor alongside male industrialists.

Additionally, Margaret's success in navigating class tensions is intimately tied to her resistance to being consumed by either sentimentality or cynicism. She does not idealize the working class, nor does she demonize capital. She sees complexity, ambiguity, and suffering on all sides. Kay Millard observes this nuanced portrayal in Gaskell's treatment of workers: "Always, but particularly in *Mary Barton* and *North and South*, they [characters at the lower end of the social scale] are treated as fully rounded human beings. Their customs are respected; their language is used as part of their own culture, rather than as any attempt to patronise them by suggesting that they have not been taught to speak properly" (Millard, 2001, p. 11). This refusal to simplify social reality is a hallmark of Gaskell's realism and a key reason why *North and South* remains a vital text in the study of Victorian class politics.

As seen in this section, the class transition represented by Margaret is characterized by moral solidity, dialogue, and reformist idealism, as opposed to Pip's emotional fragmentation or Heathcliff's angry destructiveness. Supporting this view, Sarah Dredge argues that: "The dominant vehicle of both plot and theme in the novel is conversation... It is through lengthy debates and personal confrontations within the wider social environment that the central characters come to greater understanding, which culminates in the revision of industrial and social practices" (Dredge, 2012, p. 93). Furthermore, Carol A. Martin suggests such adaptability is key to survival within the novel's framework: "Without adaptability, with reliance only on a source of power outside oneself, or in the absence of such authority, having nothing to rely on, one is doomed. Those characters who have within themselves the strength to adapt will survive..." (Martin, 1983, p. 99). Thus, Gaskell's novel does not show class change as something that just happens. Instead, it presents it as a duty, and as something people must work for.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Having examined the trajectories of Pip in *Great Expectations*, Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights*, and Margaret Hale in *North and South*, one can now synthesize how these three characters present class mobility in distinct but connected ways. What emerges from this comparison is that social ascent in Victorian literature is never purely economic, but it is deeply entangled with questions of identity, genre, gender, and symbolic belonging to a class. Class mobility, in other words, is not simply about where characters go in society, but how they feel, act, and are perceived as they try to get there.

In Dickens's realist framework, Pip's journey can be read as an aspirational and economic climb framed through the lens of

the *Bildungsroman*. However, the outcome is not a triumphant resolution but a return to moral humility. Pip's narrative represents a failure of internalization. He gains wealth but never the embodied practices of the class he aspires to. As Bourdieu would frame it, Pip lacks the *habitus* of the elite, and this mismatch results in symbolic failure. His sense of dislocation aligns with Peter Blau's claim that "mobile persons are not well integrated in either class... their behavior is expected to be intermediate between the classes" (Blau, 1956, p. 292). Pip fails not because he lacks money, but because he overcommits to the ceremonial aspects of gentility while missing its informal, internalized values. Dickens dramatizes this failure as a kind of tragic misreading, wherein education and refinement are insufficient to guarantee true acceptance or emotional fulfillment.

By contrast, Heathcliff's path in *Wuthering Heights* reflects symbolic mobility driven not by economic ambition but by emotional vengeance. His social rise lacks moral and narrative resolution. In the Gothic genre, Heathcliff's transgression of class boundaries is not assimilative but destructive. As Daenekindt and Roose note, socially mobile individuals often perform conformity in public while retaining internal dissonance: "In the public sphere, individuals who are socially mobile display greater alignment with the norms of their destination class" (Daenekindt & Roose, 2013, p. 313). Yet Heathcliff does not perform — he disrupts. Heathcliff exists in a state of symbolic vengeance, never integration. Although he attains material wealth, his social rejection transforms into hostility and control. Heathcliff's orientation toward status, not his wealth per se, fuels his obsessive revenge. His behavior aligns with Blau's theory that upward mobility without new social ties leads to isolation: "Mobile persons are not well integrated in either class... their behavior is expected to be intermediate between the classes" (Blau, 1956, p. 292). This situation of being neither accepted above nor below

becomes a ground for emotional volatility and narrative breakdown.

Gaskell's *North and South* offers a contrasting case in Margaret Hale, whose class movement is not marked by rupture but by negotiation. Her trajectory does not conform to the traditional model of mobility through acquisition or dominance, but rather through relational transformation. Margaret's success stems from what Turner calls the ability to navigate "ceremonial" and "working" values — the internal and external codes of class — without mistaking one for the other (Turner, 1964, p. 360). Through empathy and dialogue, she achieves moving across class lines without emotional fragmentation. Where Pip is self-fragmented and Heathcliff alienated, Margaret models a negotiated passage that neither disowns the past nor fetishizes the future. She retains her loyalty to working-class suffering even as she moves into a bourgeois social position. Gaskell's narrative rewards this synthesis, not with complete social power, but with relational legitimacy: a union with Thornton that is both symbolic and economic.

In the end, Victorian novels don't show social mobility as simply climbing a ladder. Instead, they show it as something people have to manage and make sense of emotionally, socially, and symbolically. What really matters is not how high the characters rise, but how they understand and deal with what that rise means. Thus, the narrative outcomes differ not only by genre but by the psychological and social architectures behind each character. Pip collapses under cultural mismatch; Heathcliff explodes from symbolic rage; Margaret integrates through moral transformation. In short, social mobility in Victorian literature cannot be read as a unidirectional climb. Rather, it is a test of whether internal transformation can match external ascent, whether characters can achieve not just new roles but new ways of being. The Victorian novel becomes a laboratory for this

experiment, exposing not only the hopes of mobility but also its psychic and symbolic limits.

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**AKADEMİK PERSPEKTİFTEN**  
**DÜNYA DİLLERİ VE EDEBİYATLARI**

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