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Urban Loneliness, Polyphony of Sounds, and Psychological Intimacy: An Artistic Interpretation of Anar's Short Story Me, You, He, and the Telephone

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Abstract: This article is devoted to an artistic interpretation of the short story Me, You, He, and the Telephone (Mən, Sən, O və Telefon), written in 1967 by Anar, a prominent representative of twentieth-century Azerbaijani prose. Drawing on contemporary international literary theory and short-story poetics—specifically close reading, narratology, and core interpretive questions—the study examines the text's layers of meaning, symbolic systems, chronotopic structure, and psychological narrative technique. The aim of the research is to enable a reading of the text not merely as a chance telephone acquaintance, but as a profound artistic-aesthetic structure situated within the alienation of the individual from self and others in a modern urban environment, emotional communication established through sounds, and the severed threads of memory.

During the interpretive analysis, details appearing at the beginning of the text—such as the motif of the "dead" telephone number, the five-digit memory code, and the scent of violets—are evaluated as symbols of separation, impassable distance, and internal prohibition. At the same time, the chance call emerging during a night walk after a wedding, principled clashes in the academic environment, coolness in friendly relations, and the radio waves, piano scales, and airplane drone heard on the night airwaves are analyzed as semantic elements completing the psychological drama of the story. From a narratological standpoint, the alternation of first-person narration with interior monologue and dialogue brings to light the protagonist Seymur's need for self-expression and the cathartic nature of his confessional dialogue with a woman's voice he does not know.

In the story, the triangle of relations formed by the pronouns "Me," "You," and "He" demonstrates the fragility of human closeness and the variability of subjective perception. Key questions advanced in international literary studies for analyzing short prose texts—who speaks, what happens, how space and time operate, which symbols and motifs recur, and what is spoken versus left silent in the text—are applied systematically to this story. Consequently, it becomes clear that within the compact form of the short story, Anar masterfully portrays individual silence amid the noise of a big city and the sudden spiritual intimacy arising between two strangers.

Keywords: artistic interpretation, Anar, Me, You, He, and the Telephone, short story analysis, close reading, narratology, urban loneliness, symbolism, interior monologue

Introduction

Short prose—especially the short story genre—despite its compact length, is an aesthetic system complex enough to be compared with the novel in terms of artistic density, semantic load, and emotional impact (Poe, 1842/2004; Brooks & Warren, 1979). Written in 1967 by Anar, who played a key role in shaping lyrical-psychological and modern prose in twentieth-century Azerbaijani literature, Me, You, He, and the Telephone is precisely such a text (Anar, 2001). At first glance, the story may appear as the depiction of a simple event—a chance call made from a telephone booth at midnight after a gathering of friends, followed by subsequent conversations. Yet as we descend into the depth of the text, deep psychological layers, the inner loneliness of the modern urban individual, painful traces of memory, and the dramatic anatomy of the need for communication open up behind this simple event (Qarayev, 2002; Mammadov, 2011).

The interpretation of a literary text requires the reader and researcher to move beyond a chronological retelling of the plot and analyze the text's semantic codes, network of motifs, narrative point of view, and linguistic-stylistic devices in interconnection (Barthes, 1975; Genette, 1980). In international literary studies and literature teaching methodology, a number of systematic approaches have formed for interpreting the short story. In particular, the close reading tradition, narratological analysis, and character-motif analysis show that every word, punctuation mark, recurring detail, and silence in a story carries a meaning-generating function (Brooks & Warren, 1979; Rimmon-Kenan, 2002).

The aim of this article is to subject Anar's Me, You, He, and the Telephone to a comprehensive artistic interpretation on the basis of core methodological principles and interpretive questions applied to story analysis in international literary studies. In the course of the analysis, both the internal structure of the text and direct quotations from the story as well as references to scholarly-theoretical literature are presented in accordance with APA (7th ed.) standards.

In Western and international literary scholarship, when analyzing a story, alongside the text's autonomous aesthetic value, its internal structure and the meaning relationship it establishes with the reader are brought to the fore (Brooks & Warren, 1979; Booth, 1983). The close reading method moves from the surface meaning of the text toward its deeper layers, uncovering contrasts, symbols, metaphors, and shifts in tone. Narratology, meanwhile, investigates the identity of the narrator, the operating mechanism of time, the sequence of events, and the characters' speech-thought strategies (Genette, 1980; Rimmon-Kenan, 2002).

In international sources on short-story poetics and literary analysis—for instance, foundational anthologies and methodological manuals such as Literature: An Introduction to Fiction, Poetry, Drama, and Writing—the following five core sets of questions hold particular significance for interpreting a literary text (Kennedy & Gioia, 2016; Klarer, 2004):

1. The narrator and point-of-view question: Who tells the story, what are their range of knowledge and emotional stance, and how does the narration change over time? (Genette, 1980; Booth, 1983).

2. The plot, conflicts, and turning-points question: How are events constructed, what are the main internal and external conflicts, and where are the key moments that alter the course of events? (Brooks & Warren, 1979).

3. The chronotope (space and time) question: How do the settings and time intervals in which the story takes place reinforce the characters' state of mind and the theme? (Bakhtin, 1981; Klarer, 2004).

4. The symbols, motifs, and artistic-details question: Which objects, sounds, colors, and expressions in the text carry symbolic weight and acquire new meanings through repetition? (Kennedy & Gioia, 2016).

5. The word, silence, and subtext question: What hidden meanings do what characters say versus what they leave unsaid, moments of silence, and the rhythm of language convey? (Rimmon-Kenan, 2002).

When we look at Me, You, He, and the Telephone within the framework of these five questions, it becomes clear that every detail of the text serves a unified psychological and semantic center—the complex path of an individual moving from loneliness to communication, from memory to the present moment, and from external noise to inner confession (Anar, 2001).

In story analysis, the first feature that draws attention is the disruption of the linear flow of time at the beginning of the work and the narration starting directly from inside an emotional-philosophical culmination—the feeling of separation and loss (Genette, 1980). Before explaining where events began, the first-person narrator, Seymur, confronts the reader with the sorrow of a "dead" telephone number. In the opening paragraphs of the story, this metaphor unfolds as follows:

"Yesterday your telephone died. It isn't only people who die... Telephone numbers die too" (Anar, 2001, p. 1).

Applying the verb "to die" to an inanimate communication number in this quotation is not an accidental poetic comparison; it is the expression of the inner death of a relationship, a memory, and a possibility of communication. Continuing, the narrator emphasizes the selectivity of memory and the exceptional place of the five-digit number in his own life:

"Those five digits, and precisely in that sequence, were the dearest gift for you. Five digits, her voice, and the scent of violets coming from the telephone receiver" (Anar, 2001, p. 1).

Here, the synthesis of sight, hearing, and smell (synesthesia) shows how vivid yet simultaneously unreachable memory is. The "scent of violets" coming from the telephone receiver is the delicate, tender, and unforgettable trace of past closeness. Yet this connection has already been broken, and for the narrator that number has turned into a "forbidden territory" (Anar, 2001, p. 1). From an interpretive standpoint, "crossing four-fifths of the distance"—dialing four digits and not dialing the fifth—expresses the self-protective mechanism of human will and the moral barrier standing before a forbidden memory (Anar, 2001, p. 1).

From a narratological perspective, the narrator stands here in a homodiegetic (participating in the events) and retrospective (remembering the past) position (Genette, 1980). He both confesses his past mistakes and loneliness and tries to understand the meaning of those events from the present moment. The tone of the narration is by turns lyrical and fragile, ironic and sharp, and deeply confessional in a psychological sense (Booth, 1983).

In story analysis, the questions "what happens?" and "what are the main conflicts?" show that the plot of the work does not consist merely of a romantic acquaintance (Brooks & Warren, 1979). The retrospective line of the story begins at the wedding of his friend Rasim. In Firuz's toast, the fate of the

"five friends"—Firuz, Kamal, Murad, Rasim, and Seymur—is recalled, and the changes brought by family life are presented with humorous yet thought-provoking nuances (Anar, 2001, p. 2).

Seymur is both close to and somewhat apart from this circle of friends. Against the backdrop of his friends' family-household concerns, children, and everyday habits, he is a single man left alone. Out of a joke that arises while walking the night streets after the wedding, a random number is dialed from a telephone booth: Firuz, his wife, Kamal, the digit named by his wife, and Murad each call out a digit, while the word of Murad's wife is cut short by busy signals (Anar, 2001, pp. 2–3). This scene shows how chance and a collective game in modern human life can turn into a fateful shift.

However, the conflict in the story is not limited to the line of love and loneliness. The sharp clash Seymur experiences at his workplace—at a research institute—with his academic advisor and head of laboratory reveals his inner principledness, uncompromising character, and unease in the social environment (Anar, 2001, pp. 3–4). The advice his friend Firuz gives him brings out the clash of two different life philosophies:

"Even if you're right, there are different forms of expressing and defending the truth. By making everyone your enemy, you won't convince anyone. Have a little tact, a little finesse" (Anar, 2001, pp. 3–4).

Seymur, however, does not accept Firuz's "diplomacy" (siyasətçilik) and prioritizes his inner sincerity and protest against injustice:

"That's why," I said, "this diplomacy of yours has completely gotten on my nerves" (Anar, 2001, p. 4).

This dialogue deepens the psychological and social meaning of the work. Seymur is a modern intellectual type who has difficulty adapting to his surroundings, speaking his mind, and being understood—not only in love or nocturnal loneliness (Qarayev, 2002; Mammadov, 2011). The inner tension he cannot fully open up to even his close friends is precisely what he tells at midnight to the woman he does not know on the other end of the telephone line (Anar, 2001, p. 5).

In international literary studies, the chronotope—that is, the emotional-meaning atmosphere created by the fusion of space and time within a literary text—plays a decisive role in interpretation (Bakhtin, 1981; Klarer, 2004). In Me, You, He, and the Telephone, time is linked primarily to night and midnight, while space is the streets of a sleeping city, the seaside boulevard, the public telephone booth, domestic rooms, and the invisible radio-telephone space (Anar, 2001, pp. 2–5).

Nighttime in literary texts is traditionally the time of introspection, confession, sleeplessness, and spiritual journey. Daytime business rush, "a hundred and fifty-two thousand tasks," and formal discussions cover over the individual's inner voices (Anar, 2001, p. 3). When night falls and the city goes quiet, however, the individual is left alone with their loneliness. When his friends disperse after the wedding, Seymur's return to the seaside park and the deserted boulevard is tied directly to this inner emptiness:

"We continued on our way, gradually broke up, each went to his own home, and I, for some reason, felt very lonely. I went back to the seaside park, walked along the deserted boulevard for a long time, looking at the dark sea and the colorful buoys in the distance..." (Anar, 2001, p. 3).

Here, the "dark sea" and "colorful buoys" show both the beauty and the unattainability of the modern urban landscape. The telephone booth, meanwhile, becomes a small, enclosed sanctuary of

communication in this open and cold nocturnal space. Interestingly, in the story, acoustic space is foregrounded even more than physical meeting. The telephone line, radio waves, piano music coming from next door, and the drone of an airplane flying overhead cross physical boundaries and link two different homes, two different lives with invisible threads (Anar, 2001, pp. 4–5).

One of the main requirements of the close reading method is to trace the symbolic and acoustic (sound) system of a text (Brooks & Warren, 1979; Kennedy & Gioia, 2016). In this story by Anar, the telephone, voice, radio, piano, and airplane are not merely household objects or background sounds; they turn into symbols of human psychology and modern civilization (Mammadov, 2011; Valiyev, 2008).

The telephone carries a dual function in the story. On the one hand, it is a means that shortens long distances, brings strangers closer to one another, and transmits the warmth of a voice in the depth of night. On the other hand, it is also an indicator of physical absence and distance: a person does not see the other party, but senses their state solely from the intonation of their voice, their breathing, and their silence. Lifting or hanging up the receiver, dialing the number or stopping on the final digit, is the material expression of the protagonist's inner decisions (Anar, 2001, pp. 1, 3).

One of the most poetic and artistically original parts of the story is the scene in which the woman speaks about her broken radio and surrounding sounds (Anar, 2001, pp. 4–5). The tube of the woman's radio has burned out, and she usually listens to the radio so as not to hear the tiring piano scales played by a girl next door. The way the woman describes the airwaves shows the sound and meaning mosaic of the modern world:

"The airwaves are like the inside of my home. Look, there's always a night concert here—as if I saw her fingers moving across the radio waves—and here are broken melodies flying over distant oceans. A storm is always roaring here, and here they're speaking in a language I don't understand" (Anar, 2001, p. 4).

In this passage, the airwaves are presented as a whole universe—"the night of the world"—where distant oceans, storms, foreign languages, concerts, laughter, whispers, and dramas exist simultaneously (Anar, 2001, pp. 4–5). Amid this multiplicity of sounds, the woman feels both part of the world and experiences her own silence and loneliness among those sounds.

The piano sound—"a bothersome girl who plays from morning till evening" and "monotonous scales"—symbolizes the endless, sometimes tiring rhythm of everyday life (Anar, 2001, pp. 4–5). The drone of the airplane, meanwhile, creates a symbolic bridge between sky and earth, above and below, closeness and distance. The answer "From the sky" given to the woman's question, "Are radios and airplanes related, then?", brings a fairy-tale-like lyrical flight and philosophical lightness to the text (Anar, 2001, p. 5).

The title of the story—Me, You, He, and the Telephone—itself provides an important key for artistic interpretation. In linguistics and narratology, personal pronouns are not merely a grammatical category, but a means by which the subject positions themselves and others (Benveniste, 1971; Genette, 1980).

1. "Me" is the narrator Seymur: a subject who has inner shocks, principledness, loneliness, and a need for confession.

2. "You" is both the female figure left behind the earlier love and the "dead" telephone, and the new interlocutor who enters life through the night call and opens Seymur's closed world with her voice, laughter, irony, and sincerity.

3. "He" can be read both as a third person outside, a forgotten or background memory-figure, and an invisible "third force" (the past, another person, or an outside gaze) in the communication between two people.

4. "Telephone" is the medium that both unites and separates these pronouns.

In the dialogue between the two people, caution, suspicion, and irony are felt at first. On the first call, the woman is surprised that a chance acquaintance happens at a late hour, and on the second call, she becomes suspicious because of the change in voice:

"Your voice was different then," she said and added ironically, "or maybe it's a different person speaking this time. Last time another friend of the groom complains of loneliness. You've gotten wrapped up in pastime phone adventures" (Anar, 2001, p. 4).

This sharp and ironic reaction shows the woman's defensive layer; she does not immediately believe a stranger's words and protects her boundary. Yet as the conversation lengthens and the sincerity of the voice and the feeling of loneliness become clear, this barrier between them softens. The woman's confession—"It's a good thing you called, otherwise I was getting awfully bored tonight too. My radio broke"—confirms that communication arises from a mutual need (Anar, 2001, p. 4).

In international literary studies, during the interpretation of a text, attention is paid not only to what is said, but also to what is left silent, unfinished thoughts, and subtext (Rimmon-Kenan, 2002; Klarer, 2004). In Me, You, He, and the Telephone, moments of silence are as meaningful as speech. The woman falling silent on the telephone receiver to listen to the drone of the airplane, and then falling silent again, brings the stillness of time and space into the text (Anar, 2001, p. 5).

Even more importantly, Seymur confesses to this very stranger things he has told no one else until then:

"Astonishing even myself, I don't know why I began telling this stranger things I hadn't told anyone. About my difficulties at work, about my old friend Firuz and me growing apart day by day, about why I disliked my academic advisor, about saying whatever came to my mouth to him in the discussion, and other such things" (Anar, 2001, p. 5).

This confession shows a paradox well known in modern psychology and literary studies—the "intimacy with a stranger" paradox: sometimes it is easier to open our heart to a voice that carries no social role or burden of judgment than to people we have known for years and who are beside us in everyday life. Because that voice does not label us in advance; it simply listens.

The contemporary relevance of the story for today's reader lies precisely here. In an era when means of communication, telephones, and sounds have multiplied, the human need to remain alone in one's inner world, not be understood, and seek sincere communication remains unchanged (Qarayev, 2002; Brooks & Warren, 1979). Anar's text does not give the reader ready-made answers; instead, it makes felt the delicate tremors of human relationships, the severed ties of memory, and the value of a sudden spiritual contact formed through a voice.

Conclusion

This research, conducted on the basis of close reading, a narratological approach, and core interpretive questions applied to analyzing a short prose text in international literary studies, showed that Anar's Me, You, He, and the Telephone is a mature literary text possessing a deep psychological and symbolic structure (Anar, 2001; Brooks & Warren, 1979; Rimmon-Kenan, 2002).The "dead" telephone number and the scent of violets at the beginning of the work shape the motif of separation and memory; the post-wedding night walk and the chance call set the psychological axis of the plot in motion; clashes in the workplace environment and coolness in friendly relations deepen the protagonist's inner tension (Anar, 2001, pp. 1–5; Qarayev, 2002). The night city, boulevard, telephone booth, radio airwaves, piano scales, and airplane drone create the chronotope and acoustic-symbolic world of the text (Bakhtin, 1981; Kennedy & Gioia, 2016). Finally, in the system of relations established by the pronouns "Me," "You," and "He," a delicate moral bridge forms between human loneliness and sincere confession (Anar, 2001, pp. 4–5; Mammadov, 2011). Thus, within the possibilities of the short prose form, the story reflects at a high artistic level the inner world of the modern individual, the semantic weight of sounds, and the fragile beauty of communication.

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