THE GOOD TERRORIST
DORIS LESSING´S NARRATIVE STRATEGIES IN PRESENTING TERRORIST PSYCHOLOGY

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The following paper on Doris Lessing´s novel The Good Terrorist aims to analyze the aesthetic strategies the author uses to present a group of young terrorists and a fatal act of terrorism to the readers.

Before I start to discuss the novel´s aesthetics, I would like to outline the underlying premise of my design. Research on terrorism — understood as violent acts against victims of symbolic meaning — is largely carried out in the fields of psychology, sociology, history and anthropology. Scientists like John Horgan, Maxwell Taylor, Louise Richardson and Arie Kruglanski are doing research on the subject within each of their special disciplines, but also from an interdisciplinary perspective.

3 Louise Richardson, Was Terroristen wollen: Die Ursachen der Gewalt und wie wir sie bekämpfen können (Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verlag, 2007).
For a literature historian the question arises: what part can literature and its analysis possibly play in the interdisciplinary research on terrorism? The phenomenon itself shows up in literature as regularly as it does in non-fictional discourses. In other words, what can the reader of a novel on terrorism gain that he has not already learned from the scientists already mentioned above?

Martha Nussbaum shows how cultural products like literature and music are essential to the formation of our ethical and moral beliefs and judgments. Throughout her discussion she sees a special quality in *narration*. Looking at emotion as a part of cognition (instead of its opposite), she shows how emotions are eventually judgmental stories we tell ourselves on something or someone in our lives: I love someone or something *because* of past events that are related to that person or thing. Narrations are part of the emotion itself. Nussbaum claims that this way literary prose, seen as a narrative cultural product, decidedly appeals to the construction of our moral and ethical beliefs. Therefore a good text analysis, according to Nussbaum, aside from dealing with the text’s “contents”, has to include a discussion of the narrative strategies and what kind of impact they can have on our ethical values.5

So far the theoretical premise underlying the following analysis of Lessing’s text. What I would like to discuss are the narrative strategies used by Lessing to present a group of terrorists and their activities to the reader — is there an implicit moral or ethical suggestion in the text, regarding terrorism or being/becoming a terrorist?

The action is set in London in the Thatcher. Lessing introduces the reader to a group of young squatters in their late twenties to early thirties who claim for themselves an empty house the officials intend to tear down. These young people whom the reader gets to know very intimately call themselves the “Communist Central Union” and identify with a working class they do not seem to know at all. As revolutionaries fighting capitalism, almost none of them work in a day job. They plan to join forces with the IRA to work as a British branch in London. When their plan fails the squatters decide to create their own terrorist scenario by placing a car bomb in front of a hotel, with the result of five people dying and an even greater number of casualties.

It is only a rough sketch of the novel’s contents. Looking at the narrative strategies, what first comes to mind is that the action is almost wholly shown from the personal

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perspective (but using a third person narrator) of one of the group’s members, Alice Mellings. Doris Lessing invites the recipient to take on Alice’s point of view and does not interrupt the presentation of the protagonist’s thoughts by the comments of an authorial narrative voice: The reader has to judge Alice’s thoughts and actions without authorial guidance. With the subject terrorism being a rather explosive topic, the reader is given a great responsibility and the question for the novel’s impact on its readers arises all the more.

Lessing gives much room to the twisted thoughts of Alice Mellings and allows the implicit reader to identify with the protagonist. But right from the beginning we are also shown that Alice’s psyche is terribly fractured and split; a problem Alice herself cannot afford to realize. She is torn between contradicting impulses: on the one hand, her hate towards capitalism and plain middle-class life, on the other hand, her desire to project the despised structures of her origins on her squatter friends and to reproduce civic life among the revolutionaries. She acts out that desire through cleaning and rebuilding parts of the house they live in, paying for water and electricity and creating meals for large group dinners.

The recipient follows Alice’s trail of thoughts that focus on domestic affairs and on money to be used for the improvement of the household — not what you would expect from the average terrorist, this paradox explains the novel’s oxymoron title *The Good Terrorist.*

Different from the implicit reader, the protagonist is unable to see the paradoxes and conflicts of her needs and wishes. Right from the beginning, Lessing, in one of the very rare authorial passages, shows that Alice is a mentally and physically underdeveloped young woman unable to open up to change and progress:

Alice was stocky, and she had a pudgy, formless look to her. Sometimes a girl of twelve, even thirteen, before she is lit by pubescence, is as she will be in middle

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8 Greene, *Doris Lessing*, 213; Boschmann, “Excrement» and »Kitsch» in Lessing’s »The Good Terrorist»,” 95.
E. [..] Forty years of being women will boil through them, and leave them as they are now, heavy and cautious, and anxious to please.\(^9\)

The passage cited above gives the implied reader the chance to establish a distance to Lessing’s protagonist. It serves as an early warning sign pointing toward Alice’s inner difficulties. However, the established distance soon enough is reduced as Alice’s communist friends talk about their plan to join forces with the IRA: “They are at it again, she was thinking.”\(^10\) The protagonist’s favorite subject seems to be the renovation of the house they all live in, she herself assuming the role of the group’s mother.\(^11\) Although the protagonist claims the opposite, the reader is clearly led to the belief that the Communist Union’s aims come second after establishing a family structure among people who actually fight these civic ideals.

It soon becomes clear that Alice’s constructive endeavors are doomed amid the net of destructive interpersonal relations she has gotten herself into. Roberta and Fay, the lesbian couple that lives with the squatters because their women’s community will not tolerate them any longer, clearly do not want to be part of Alice’s big family.\(^12\) Alice’s closest friend Jasper permanently tries to steal money from her that she puts aside for her housekeeping activities.\(^13\)

The longer the recipient witnesses Alice’s fruitless efforts, the more he expects the protagonist to rethink her strategies and to break up with the destructive squatters for good. This not being the case, the distance between the blindfolded protagonist and the implied reader is constantly expanding.

Like her name mate in the Lewis Carroll novel, Alice is slipping from reality into a dream world; but what was the rabbit hole for her predecessor to Alice Mellings seems to be the act of repression of all evidence that endangers her vision of a happy squatter family. In repression wonderland, everything works out the way Alice wants it to, and what has not yet worked out her way she is seemingly able to fix in no time at all. It not only applies to the protagonist’s desires for family structures, but it also applies to her longings for society’s communist revolution.

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\(^11\) Moan Rowe, *Doris Lessing*, 100.
\(^12\) Lessing, *The Good Terrorist*, 29.
\(^13\) Lessing, *The Good Terrorist*, 188.
The implied reader is shown Alice’s enormous capacity for repression, a repression the protagonist manages to cultivate up to the point where it culminates in an overall distorted picture of reality. Although the implied reader sees that reality exclusively through Alice’s eyes, the realization of her constant repression of plain evidence often forces him to come to a conclusion in opposition to Alice’s. It is the case when Alice confronts Reggie and Mary, who have a regular financial income, on the subject of paying for the restoration of the house:

This was taking place at the kitchen table. Reggie and Mary opposite each other, so amiable and self-assured; Alice sitting at the head of the table, waiting for what would come her way. She knew already. She could see in Mary’s eyes a gleam that meant she was calculating, not what she might owe to Alice, but what she was accumulating, of course in the moment only in imagination, for the purchase of their flat, or house.

This passage makes clear that the protagonist’s judgment is impulsive and irresponsible: she hates exactly the only people in the house who are willing to support her vision at least to a certain degree. What she hates them for is that they deny giving her all their money like Alice herself would do. The principle of economic reasoning is unfamiliar to Alice: she gives her working capacities for free to people who exploit her willingness to help but refuse to be constructive and helpful in return. In Mary and Reggie she hates the quality she herself does not possess.

On the side of the recipient, witnessing these interpersonal mechanisms through Alice’s eyes, the realization of Alice’s incongruent, distorted views drastically reduces empathy with the novel’s main character. Paradoxically, it is the personal narrative style that manages to achieve that effect of reduced empathy; witnessing Alice’s thoughts first hand only serves to drastically highlight the lapses of her consciousness. During the reading process, the implied reader is led to comprehend Alice’s growing inability to see plain facts and truths if they interfere with her desire to create a supporting family in a house full of dysfunctional people.

14 Greene, Doris Lessing, 212.
15 Lessing, The Good Terrorist, 178.
On a higher level, it is the traps and failures of ideological thinking that Lessing is highlighting with her protagonist: Alice categorically declares her communist friends as good people although they are constantly spoiling everything she is fighting for, while her middle class relatives are categorized as selfish and bad although there are several attempts from that side to help the protagonist.\textsuperscript{17} Lessing demonstrates the way ideologies and ideological thinking result in a distorted view of reality and endanger the mental health of the ideologist who may indeed have had a pure motif for his actions in the first place.

This is shown in an impressive passage near the novel’s ending when Alice confronts her mother. Dorothy Mellings, a woman with socialist political views but lacking Alice’s ideological obsessions, exhausts herself in trying to “cure” her daughter from her denial of reality: “Oh you, running about playing at revolutions, playing little games, thinking you’re important. You’re just peasants, you’ll never do anything.”\textsuperscript{18} But Alice is unable to revise her drastic plans for a violent social revolution. Instead of exchanging thoughts with her well meaning mother, she bursts into verbal aggression:

Alice shrieked, “you’ll see, you shitty old fascist. You and your fascist friends. That’s all you care about...” She was incoherent, panting, sweating. “But you just wait. Everything is rotten. It’s all undermined. But you’re so dozy and stupid and you can’t even see it. We are going to pull it all down.”\textsuperscript{19}

Ironically, the blindness she accuses her mother of is the blindness she herself possesses — another one of the text’s drastic ironies serving to distance the reader from identifying with the protagonist. It also serves to reveal the hollow phrases her ideological thinking seems to consist of; she calls her mother’s civic world “rotten” and “undermined” without ever feeling the need to be more precise than that.

Among other things, the protagonist’s inhibited personal development is expressed in her resistance to read any kind of fiction. When she finds her squatter friend Pat, whom she believes to be a “good communist” (not to say a good terrorist) in a chair reading a novel by Nabokov, she reflects on her own inglorious relation to literature:

\textsuperscript{17} Lessing, The Good Terrorist, 33-37.  
\textsuperscript{18} Lessing, The Good Terrorist, 330.  
\textsuperscript{19} Lessing, The Good Terrorist, 330.
She used to wonder how it was that a comrade with a good, clear and correct view of life could be prepared to endanger it by reading all that risky equivocal stuff that she might dip into, hastily, retreating, as if scalded. She had even secretly read almost to the end of one novel recommended as a useful tool in the struggle, but felt as she had as a child: if she persevered, allowing one book to lead her on to another, she might find herself lost without maps.²⁰

This passage doubly serves to establish a distance between the recipient and the novel’s protagonist: after all, the person holding the book, reading Lessing’s novel, unlike Alice, is definitely a reader. Apart from that, the passage cited above implies that it is exactly the protagonist’s refusal to see things from a perspective opposite to her own that leads her to her final state of being lost without maps.

Like for her younger predecessor in Lewis Carroll’s novel, her dream gradually changes into a nightmare. When she finally realizes the fruitlessness of her attempts to establish a family structure in the squat, it is too late for breaking up with them because the protagonist has literally burned all bridges behind her: she stole money from her father’s office²¹ and verbally abused her mother,²² so all she has left is to cling to her illusion for better or worse.

The aggression fuelled by the failure of her housekeeping plans and the exploitation of her good will she cannot direct to those that have deserted and hurt her, for they are all she has left. Instead of confronting those who are responsible for her frustration, the protagonist all the more projects her aggression onto middle class society that has to serve as a scapegoat.²³ Her aggression is vented in the hotel bombing at the text’s ending.²⁴

Ironically, the text closes with Alice sitting all alone in the former squat, with her friends gone into hiding after the bombing.²⁵ Her plans for creating a safe place for herself and a family structure have ultimately come to nothing, and with it have gone

²⁰ Lessing, The Good Terrorist, 62.
²¹ Lessing, The Good Terrorist, 203.
²³ Greene, Doris Lessing, 209.
²⁴ Lessing, The Good Terrorist, 354-56.
the last traces of the implied reader’s sympathetic identification — all we can do is to pity the “poor baby.”

Regarding the narrative strategies as discussed above, Doris Lessing’s novel can rightfully be called an antiterrorist piece of literature. Despite the use of personal narration and the lack of an authorial narrator commenting on supposed rights or wrongs, the text uses irony and insight into the protagonist’s inner incongruence to establish a wide distance between the recipient and Alice Mellings. Lessing achieves it by first inviting the implied reader to identify with the protagonist and then forcing him to give up that identification whenever the text makes clear how distorted Alice’s view of reality is.

*The Good Terrorist* manages to raise our alertness for destructive interpersonal relations as well as for the nooks and crannies of ideological thinking — a thinking that, like in the novel, can result in the participation of terrorist activities.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


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