

A Study of The Black Prince from Affect Theory

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Abstract: Iris Murdoch (1919-1999) was a renowned British novelist, philosopher, and fiction theorist of the late 20th century, widely acknowledged as one of the most prolific and influential figures in English literature post-World War II. *The Black Prince* (1973) has been considered by many critics to be the best of Murdoch's novel, which won the most prestigious James Tait Black Memorial Prize. Based on affect theory, this paper makes an in-depth analysis of *The Black Prince*. Through the emotional entanglements between Bradley Pearson and other characters, the novel shows how affects affect individual moral judgment, behavior choice and self-cognition, aiming to reveal the important role of affect in individual moral growth. This paper not only provides a new perspective for understanding the *Black Prince*, but also provides a case for the application of affect theory in the analysis of literary works.

Keywords: Iris Murdoch; *The Black Prince*; affect theory

1. Introduction

1.1 Iris Murdoch and *The Black Prince*

Iris Murdoch (1919-1999), a prominent British novelist post-World War II, was celebrated for her prolific and enduring literary contributions. Beyond her acclaimed novels, Murdoch delved into philosophy and teaching. Debuting in 1954 with *Under the Net*, she crafted twenty-six novels, two poetry collections, and numerous plays, constituting a significant oeuvre in 20th-century British fiction. Her works garnered prestigious awards, including the James Tait Black Memorial Prize, the Whitbread Prize, and the Booker Prize. Honored as a Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire in 1987, Murdoch's literary legacy was recognized in 2008 by *The Times*, listing her among "The 50 Greatest British Writers Since 1945"^[16].

The Black Prince (1973) is considered as one of the most well-received works in Iris Murdoch's later oeuvre, featuring Bradley Pearson, a 58-year-old writer who has retired from the tax office in advance for his artistic creation^[1]. An unexpected visitor Francis upset his plan. The novel unfolds with a call from Arnold, then narrates his entanglement with his ex-wife Christian, his friend Arnold, his sister Priscilla, his friend's wife Rachel, and his friend's daughter Julian, and ends with a call from Rachel, which led innocent him imprisoned. Before he died of cancer in custody, he completed his authentic art creation and found his self-value of existence.

1.2 Literature Review

The Black Prince (1973), with its rich themes and unique narrative style, has been the academic attention both domestically and internationally, stimulating a diverse range of interpretations across various literary and theoretical frameworks. For example, in the domestic sphere, Wang and Ge (2023) delved into the causes of tragedy of *The Black Prince*'s Protagonist Bradley from spatial level. Zhang (2022) explored the stylistic characteristics of *The Black Prince*. Shen and Li (2021) and Wang (2010) analyzed the intertextuality of *The Black Prince*. Wang and Cheng (2019), Xu (2016) and An (2011) probed into the perspective of feminism. Jiang (2014) examines the perspective of narratology. Besides, there are also many theme-related studies, like art, good, Eros, the self and so on. Internationally, scholars have also contributed significantly to the discourse surrounding *The Black Prince*. García (2019) reexamines gender dynamics within the novel, while Alicia (2018) explores its modernization of Shakespeare's Hamlet in terms of identity and gender. Additionally, Telegina and Butsyak (2016) delve into Murdoch's artistic method, while Baschiera (2009) and Lee (2004) offer analyses focused on ambiguity, narrative technique, and thematic elements.

Despite the wealth of existing research on *The Black Prince*, an exploration of the novel from the

perspective of affect theory remains conspicuously absent from both domestic and international scholarship. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap and offers new insights into the novel.

2. Theoretical Bases

Affect theory, emerging in the 1990s, has its roots in the philosophical ideas of Baruch Spinoza and was further developed by Gilles Deleuze^[12]. Spinoza introduced the concept of “affect” in his work *Ethics*, describing it as the capacity of bodies to affect and be affected, leading to changes in the body’s power of action. Deleuze expanded on Spinoza’s ideas, integrating the concept of affect into his own theories of becoming and immanence, emphasizing its dynamic and unstructured nature^[4]. Brian Massumi later defined affect as a pre-personal intensity that cannot be fully captured by language, distinguishing it from emotions, which are social and structured manifestations of these intensities^[10]. Affect differs from emotion and motivation in its form and function. While emotions are the socially recognizable states that arise from affective intensities, affect itself is an unformed and unstructured force. Emotions can be categorized and identified, whereas affect operates at a pre-conscious level, driving these emotions. Affect can also be seen as the underlying mechanism that triggers emotional responses, which then influence motivation. This relationship highlights how affect acts as a foundational force that propels individuals towards certain actions or responses, thus linking bodily sensations to emotional and motivational states^[2].

Affect plays a significant role in the moral development of individuals by influencing their capacity to engage with the world and others. Spinoza’s idea that affects can increase or decrease an individual’s power of action suggests that positive affects, such as joy, can enhance one’s ability to act ethically and empathetically. Conversely, negative affects, like sorrow, can diminish this capacity. Deleuze expanded this idea by emphasizing the continuous and dynamic nature of affect, suggesting that an individual’s moral growth involves navigating and harnessing these affective intensities. This process enables individuals to move beyond mere cognitive understanding and cultivate a more embodied and relational ethical sensibility.

Affect theory offers a profound framework for literary analysis by focusing on the embodied and emotional experiences of characters and readers. It moves beyond traditional cognitive and linguistic approaches, emphasizing the visceral forces and intensities that drive interactions and shape narratives. In literary studies, affect theory allows scholars to explore the non-verbal and pre-conscious dimensions of texts, uncovering how characters’ actions and readers’ responses are influenced by underlying affective forces.

The Black Prince provides a rich terrain for applying affect theory due to its complex exploration of emotions, relationships, and moral struggles. The novel’s intricate character dynamics and the intense emotional states experienced by the protagonist, Bradley Pearson, can be effectively analyzed through the lens of affect theory. By applying affect theory to *The Black Prince*, scholars can uncover the nuanced ways in which Murdoch portrays the interplay of affect, emotion, and morality. This theoretical approach enriches the analysis by highlighting the importance of bodily sensations and pre-conscious forces in shaping the narrative and its moral questions.

3. Analysis of The Black Prince from Affect Theory

3.1 Bradley Pearson’s Emotional Entanglements

Bradley Pearson’s interactions with other characters in *The Black Prince* are deeply influenced by his affective experiences, which drive his emotional responses and shape his behavior. By examining his relationships with key figures such as Arnold, Christian, and Julian, we can uncover the underlying affective forces that propel his actions and moral decisions. These relationships are not just plot devices but are crucial to understanding Bradley’s psychological and ethical struggles. This section delves into the complex emotional entanglements Bradley experiences, illustrating how affect theory can illuminate the intricate dynamics of his personal and ethical development, revealing the nuanced ways in which affect influences his interactions and self-perception.

3.1.1 Bradley and Arnold: Jealousy and Rivalry

Bradley’s relationship with Arnold Baffin is marked by deep-seated jealousy and rivalry, stemming from both professional and personal insecurities. Arnold’s success as a writer exacerbates Bradley’s

feelings of inadequacy, triggering intense affective responses that influence his actions. These affective intensities, operating at a pre-conscious level, manifest in Bradley's critical and often spiteful attitude towards Arnold. Bradley's jealousy is not merely an emotion but a force that shapes his behavior and moral judgments, leading him to undermine Arnold and question his own self-worth. Additionally, Bradley's professional envy fuels his personal vendetta, complicating their interactions further. Affect theory helps us understand that Bradley's rivalry with Arnold goes beyond simple envy; it is a dynamic interplay of affects that drives his narrative and ethical decisions throughout the novel. This relationship is a microcosm of Bradley's broader struggle with self-worth and professional identity.

3.1.2 Bradley and Christian: Nostalgia and Resentment

Bradley's relationship with his ex-wife, Christian, is a complex web of nostalgia and resentment. The affective memories of their past together linger, influencing Bradley's current perceptions and interactions with her. Nostalgia for their former life occasionally softens Bradley's attitude, yet unresolved grievances and emotional wounds fuel ongoing resentment. These conflicting affects create a volatile dynamic, where Bradley oscillates between longing for reconciliation and harboring bitterness. This affective tension impacts his ability to move forward and colors his interactions with other characters. Affect theory helps us understand how Bradley's emotional history with Christian is a powerful force that shapes his behavior and complicates his journey towards self-understanding and moral clarity. Christian's presence in Bradley's life serves as a constant reminder of past failures and unresolved emotions, which Bradley must navigate to achieve personal growth.

3.1.3 Bradley and Julian: Passion and Desire

Bradley's feelings towards Julian, Arnold's young daughter, are driven by intense passion and desire, which reveal the depths of his affective experiences. This relationship is marked by a powerful affective force that disrupts Bradley's rationality and self-control, leading to morally ambiguous actions. His passion for Julian represents more than a mere infatuation; it is an embodiment of affective intensities that challenge his sense of self and ethical boundaries. The desire he feels is a catalyst for self-reflection and artistic creation, yet it also brings turmoil and conflict. Affect theory elucidates how these pre-conscious forces drive Bradley's actions, demonstrating the profound impact of affect on his moral and emotional landscape. Julian becomes a symbol of Bradley's struggle between his aspirations and his baser instincts, further complicating his self-perception and ethical stance. Through his relationship with Julian, Bradley's struggle with desire becomes a pivotal aspect of his personal and ethical development, showcasing the powerful role of affect in shaping his journey.

3.2 Affective Intensities and Moral Judgment

Bradley Pearson's moral judgments in *The Black Prince* are significantly influenced by the affective intensities he experiences. These pre-conscious forces drive his emotions and shape his ethical decisions, often leading to internal conflict and ambiguity. By examining the role of joy, sorrow, and conflicting emotions, we can understand how Bradley navigates his moral landscape. Affect theory provides a framework to explore these dynamics, highlighting the impact of affective experiences on Bradley's ethical development and personal transformation. This section delves deeper into the specific affective intensities that drive Bradley's moral choices, illustrating the complex interplay between emotion and ethical reasoning.

3.2.1 The Role of Joy and Sorrow in Bradley's Decisions

Joy and sorrow play crucial roles in Bradley's moral decisions, acting as affective forces that shape his capacity to act and reflect. Joy, when present, enhances Bradley's sense of agency and ethical clarity, allowing him to engage with others empathetically and make morally sound choices. Conversely, sorrow diminishes his power of action, leading to despair and ethical lapses. For instance, moments of joy with Julian provide Bradley with a fleeting sense of purpose and moral insight, while his sorrow over failed relationships and professional setbacks drives him into moral ambiguity. Spinoza's concept of affect illustrates how these emotions either empower or constrain Bradley's ethical actions, influencing his journey towards self-understanding and artistic creation. Bradley's fluctuating states of joy and sorrow not only reflect his internal struggles but also serve as key moments that define his moral trajectory, highlighting the profound impact of affect on ethical decision-making.

3.2.2 Conflicting Emotions and Ethical Ambiguity

Bradley's moral landscape is fraught with conflicting emotions that generate ethical ambiguity. Feelings of love, guilt, jealousy, and anger intermingle, creating a turbulent inner world that complicates

his moral judgments. For example, his love for Julian conflicts with his guilt over betraying Arnold, leading to actions that he struggles to justify ethically. These emotional conflicts are not merely surface-level dilemmas but deep affective intensities that challenge Bradley's self-conception and moral framework. Affect theory helps us understand that these unstructured forces drive Bradley's ethical decision-making process, revealing the inherent complexity and ambiguity in his moral journey. These conflicts highlight the tension between Bradley's affective responses and his moral reasoning, illustrating the difficulty of navigating ethical decisions in the face of powerful emotions.

3.2.3 Navigating Affective Intensities for Ethical Development

Bradley's ethical development is a process of navigating through various affective intensities. His journey involves understanding and harnessing these pre-conscious forces to achieve moral growth. For instance, Bradley learns to channel his affective experiences into his art, finding a way to express and make sense of his emotions. This navigation is fraught with challenges as Bradley must reconcile his desires and ethical principles, often finding himself in morally precarious situations. Deleuze's and Spinoza's ideas on affective dynamics provide insight into how Bradley's ethical sensibility evolves. Through his affective experiences, Bradley gradually moves towards a more embodied and relational understanding of morality, highlighting the crucial role of affect in his personal transformation. Bradley's ability to navigate these intensities ultimately shapes his journey towards ethical maturity, revealing the interconnectedness of affect, emotion, and moral growth.

3.3 Affect and Self-Cognition

Bradley Pearson's journey in *The Black Prince* is deeply intertwined with his evolving self-cognition, heavily influenced by his affective experiences. These experiences shape his identity, artistic expression, and the interplay between affect and rationality. By examining how affect informs Bradley's self-perception, artistic endeavors, and decision-making processes, we gain a deeper understanding of his character and the novel's exploration of human consciousness. Affect theory provides a lens to explore these dimensions, revealing the profound impact of pre-conscious forces on Bradley's self-awareness and moral development. This section delves into the ways affect influences Bradley's self-cognition, illustrating the intricate connection between emotion and identity.

3.3.1 Bradley's Self-Perception and Identity Crisis

Bradley's self-perception is continuously reshaped by his affective experiences, leading to an ongoing identity crisis. His interactions with other characters, driven by intense emotions, challenge his sense of self and force him to confront his deepest insecurities. For example, his jealousy towards Arnold and passion for Julian expose vulnerabilities and contradictions within his identity. Affect theory helps us understand how these pre-conscious forces disrupt Bradley's self-image, compelling him to reevaluate his values and beliefs. The identity crisis he experiences is not merely a cognitive struggle but a dynamic process influenced by affective intensities that drive his personal and ethical growth. This ongoing turmoil is reflected in Bradley's constant search for meaning and purpose, highlighting the complex interplay between affect and self-perception. The identity crisis serves as a pivotal aspect of Bradley's journey, revealing the transformative power of affect in shaping one's sense of self.

3.3.2 Artistic Creation as Affective Expression

Bradley's artistic creation serves as a crucial outlet for expressing his affective experiences. His writing becomes a medium through which he channels his emotions, transforming affective intensities into creative output. This process allows Bradley to process and articulate his inner turmoil, providing a sense of catharsis and self-discovery. The affective states he experiences—ranging from passion and desire to sorrow and despair—fuel his artistic endeavors, reflecting the intricate connection between affect and creativity. Through affect theory, we can explore how Bradley's art is both a product and a reflection of his emotional landscape, highlighting the symbiotic relationship between his affective experiences and his artistic expression. Bradley's creative process thus becomes a key mechanism for navigating his emotions, illustrating how art serves as a bridge between affect and self-cognition. His artistic journey reveals the profound impact of affect on creative expression, demonstrating how emotional intensities drive and shape artistic output.

3.3.3 The Interplay of Affect and Rationality

The interplay between affect and rationality is central to Bradley's moral and personal journey. While his decisions are often driven by intense affective forces, he also attempts to navigate these emotions through rational thought. This dynamic interplay creates tension and complexity in his actions, as he struggles to balance emotional impulses with logical reasoning. For instance, his rational attempts to justify his love for Julian are constantly undermined by the overpowering affective intensity of his desire. Affect theory elucidates how these pre-conscious forces influence Bradley's rationality, demonstrating

that his ethical and personal development is shaped by the continuous negotiation between affective experiences and rational deliberation. This interplay underscores the novel's exploration of the human condition, revealing the nuanced ways in which affect and rationality coexist and shape individual identity. Bradley's journey highlights the challenges of integrating affective and rational aspects of the self, ultimately shaping his path towards moral and personal growth.

4. Conclusion

This analysis of *The Black Prince* through the lens of affect theory provides a deeper understanding of Iris Murdoch's exploration of emotions, morality, and self-cognition. By examining Bradley Pearson's relationships and the affective intensities that drive his actions, we uncover the profound impact of pre-conscious forces on his moral judgments and personal development. The dynamic interplay between joy, sorrow, conflicting emotions, and rationality highlights the complexity of Bradley's ethical journey and identity crisis.

Affect theory offers valuable insights into the nuanced ways in which Murdoch portrays the human condition, emphasizing the importance of embodied experiences in shaping individual behavior and ethical sensibility. Through this theoretical framework, we gain a richer appreciation of the intricate emotional and moral landscapes Murdoch crafts in *The Black Prince*. Bradley's journey is a testament to the power of affect in shaping human experiences, revealing the deep connections between emotion, morality, and self-awareness.

Future research can build on this foundation by applying affect theory to other literary works, exploring how pre-conscious intensities influence characters and narratives across different genres and periods. This approach not only broadens our understanding of affect theory but also enriches the field of literary studies, providing new perspectives on the interplay between emotion, morality, and self-cognition in literature. By examining the affective dimensions of literary characters, we can uncover deeper insights into the complexities of human behavior and ethical development, further illuminating the profound impact of affect on the human experience.

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