

Barış METE* 

**FOOD AND COOKING AS COMIC RELIEF IN
IRIS MURDOCH'S *THE SEA, THE SEA***

ABSTRACT

As a literary term, comic relief is the appearance of humorous and funny episodes or scenes in serious literary works. The aim of comic relief is to reduce the anxiety or distress that the audience feels as a result of the depiction of painful and pitiful events or incidents. The joy and laughter that comic relief provides balance intensity of the misery and sadness which are inherent in the narrative. Although comic relief is mostly associated with dramatic works, the scenes of food and cooking in Iris Murdoch's 1978 Booker Prize winner novel *The Sea, the Sea* illustrate some proper examples of the term. Murdoch's protagonist, the retired playwright and director Charles Arrowby, cheerfully cooks and eats whenever the mental anxiety rises to a critical level. Charles displays his enjoyment of preparing and having food so intensely that his happiness and thrill easily neutralise the uneasiness of the reader. This paper aims to illustrate how a protagonist's delight in food and cooking serves as comic relief, which reduces the intensity of the unease caused by a sad story.

Keywords: Comic relief, food, cooking, anxiety, reader.

**IRIS MURDOCH'IN *DENİZ, DENİZ* ADLI
ESERİNDE MİZAHİ FERAHLAMA OLARAK
YİYECEK VE YEMEK HAZIRLAMA**

ÖZET

Edebi bir terim olarak mizahi ferahlama, ciddi edebi eserlerde ortaya çıkan güldürücü ve eğlenceli bölüm ya da sahnelere verilen addır. Mizahi ferahlamanın amacı acı veren ve ıstıraplı olay ya da vakaların tarifinden kaynaklanan izleyicinin hissettiği endişe ya da acıyı azaltmaktır. Mizahi ferahlamanın sebep olduğu neşe ve kahkaha anlatıda yer alan ıstırap ve hüznün şiddetini dengeler. Her ne kadar mizahi ferahlama çoğunlukla tiyatro eserleri ile ilişkilendirilse de, Iris Murdoch'un 1978 Booker Ödüllü romanı *Deniz, Deniz* bu kavramın bazı önemli örneklerini betimler. Murdoch'un başkahramanı olan emekli oyun yazarı ve yönetmen Charles Arrowby, ne zaman zihinsel endişesi hassas bir seviyeye yükselse neşeye yemek hazırlar ve tadar. Charles yemek yapmaktan ve tatmaktan duyduğu zevki öylesine yoğun bir şekilde sergiler ki, kendi mutluluk ve heyecanı kolaylıkla okuyucunun tedirginliğini etkisiz hale getirir. Bu makale bir başkahramanın yiyecek ve yemek hazırlamaktan duyduğu sevincin nasıl hüzünlü bir öykünün sebep olduğu tedirginliğin şiddetini azaltan mizahi ferahlama işlevi sergilediğini göstermeyi amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar kelimeler: Mizahi ferahlama, yiyecek, yiyecek hazırlama, endişe, okuyucu.

* Assoc. Prof., Selçuk University, Faculty of Letters, Department of English Language and Literature, Konya/Türkiye, E-mail: bm@selcuk.edu.tr / Doç. Dr., Selçuk Üniversitesi, Edebiyat Fakültesi, İngiliz Dili ve Edebiyatı Bölümü, Konya/Türkiye, E-posta: bm@selcuk.edu.tr

Introduction

As a literary term, 'comic relief' is the formation of an amusing person, episode or funny and humorous speech in a humourless and sober literary work. Comic relief is used to lower the strength of strain and anxiety that the audience feels. Comic relief indicates the loosening of distress and nervousness as a result of the appearance of a humorous episode during the narration or performance of crucial and pitiful aspects and features in literary works. Comic relief mostly appears as unexpected confusion, sheer stupidity or funny remarks of characters in fictional narratives. A character in a scene of comic relief makes foolish and irrational comments or points to the idiocy and silliness of the overall situation. Comic relief is also used to anger, confuse, and provoke others by fictional characters.

Although comic relief is frequently characterised and defined as a dramatic term, the use of the word in literature is not limited to a single type or genre of literature at all. In addition to drama, comic relief appears in nondramatic works as well. While M. H. Abrams's (1999) definition of comic relief is generally related to theatrical pieces, C. Baldick (2001) and Edward Quinn (2006) widen their scope of analysis and admit comic relief within the study and interpretation of prose in general. Comic relief adjusts the dramatic atmosphere and alleviates the mental pressure and stress that the audience feels. Since comic relief brings about a temporary modification, it grants the audience the chance to detect and examine the performance from different perspectives. Comic relief is an alternation or discontinuation of the narration of the storyline of a literary work which has the proper thematic significance and weight.

Comic relief, as a specific literary term, signifies humorous chapters and intervals of a serious and sober story, which are intended to reduce the anxiety and unease of the audience. Although it seems antithetical to what it intends to do, comic relief serves to enhance the catastrophic feature of the artistic performance. Any dramatic component characterised by comic relief is to be the essential and fundamental ingredient of the entire product. If comic relief is not built in humorous chapters and intervals, it may develop as assertions, statements or reflections which again reduce the strength of the sensitive and responsive tone. Comic relief generates humour which aims to be satirical and mocking.

As comic relief is not limited to plays and performances, some proper examples of the terms should also be sought in the novel. Although humorous and funny episodes and scenes are easy to identify in a number of prose narratives, comic relief appears in Iris Murdoch's 1978 Booker Prize winner novel *The Sea, the Sea* in rather an exceptional way. Murdoch's (1999) protagonist, Charles Arrowby cooks and eats whenever tempers rise, whenever the mental anxiety and distress rise to a critical level. As Charles's autobiographical account is a tale of misfortune and sadness, food and cooking are the only elements that provide comfort and ease not only to the reader but also to Charles. Charles enjoys cooking, and he relishes preparing and consuming his food. As his mood is animated and refreshed by food, so is the reader's. Food and eating habits are already seen as communication symbols (Erdem Mete, 2023; Riley & Paugh, 2019). Burke (1987) emphasises Murdoch's Shakespearean plotting especially on *The Sea, the Sea*. It should be noted that Shakespeare's tragedies are among the best examples of the use of comic relief.

Weary of his daily routine in London, Charles is an ageing playwright and theatrical director who seeks a life of silence and tranquillity in a seashore village. After he retires from the theatre in London, Charles commences living alone in the small coastal village of Narrowdean. His only

dream is to write his own story calmly and peacefully. The village will be “a serene withdrawal” (Moss, 1986, p. 228). Nevertheless, anxiety and unrest never leave him alone. Although Charles leaves his city life behind, his mind is always occupied; he is not quite clear in his mind. He misses his old friends, feels sad about the fact that none of his friends writes a letter to him. In addition, because of his mental unrest, Charles encounters some hardships and complications which disturb, upset and even scare him absolutely. Among many occasions of disorder and disturbance, Charles finds contentment and happiness only when he cooks and eats his food. He depicts, describes, details and illustrates the way he cooks food, the way he prepares it to be eaten, the way he bakes, boils or heats food. It is easy to notice Charles’s great delight and happiness when he cooks and eats. Recognising the positive change in his tone and vocabulary is simple and straightforward.

Therefore, this paper argues that the scenes of food and cooking in Murdoch’s (1999) *The Sea, the Sea* serve as comic relief to reduce the mental restlessness and unease the reader feels. Due to the reader’s empathic relationship with Charles as the protagonist of Murdoch’s (1999) narrative, their emotional condition and state of mind display significant notifications when any complication arises. The episodes in which Charles cooks, prepares dishes, sets the table for lunch or dinner, dines or enjoys his meal all cheer, console, delight and refresh the reader as well.

Comic relief: Definition and meaning

M. H. Abrams (1999) defines comic relief as a dramatic device in which “comic characters, speeches, or scenes in a serious or tragic work” (p. 41) are presented to the audience. Abrams (1999) reminds us of the literary and historical fact that comic relief was a part of the Renaissance English drama, Elizabethan tragedy in particular. As Abrams (1999) argues, such scenes take place in dramatic works as parts or chapters of the discussions among characters. Sometimes they appear as rowdiness or pranks as part of an intention of lowering the tension or adding variation and diversity to the artistic presentation. Abrams (1999) observes comic relief as combined with the storyline in more delicately constructed performances, which contradicts and strengthens the sober and pitiful implications of the main action. Abrams (1999) believes that comic relief is one of the complicated uses of humorous ingredients of literary works. He gives *Hamlet* Act V Scene i which opens with the amusing interlude of the gravediggers as an example of comic relief. Abrams’s (1999) second example of the use of the term is *Macbeth* Act II Scene iii, where the porter's long and confused speech contradicts with the sober announcement of King Duncan’s murder. The following examples Abrams (1999) gives are *Henry IV*, where the energetic comedy stems from the character of Falstaff and *Romeo and Juliet* where the jokes and puns of Juliet’s nurse practically serve as comic relief.

C. Baldick (2001) observes comic relief as an alternation or discontinuation of the narration of the storyline of a literary work which necessarily has the proper thematic significance and weight. An appropriate example of such classification is a tragedy “by a short humorous episode” (Baldick, 2001, p. 46). Then, the question is that, what is the idea of or explanation for such farcical and humorous episodes in otherwise serious performances? According to Baldick (2001), among the numerous consequences, one explanation of the use of comic relief is relaxation and refreshment after occasions of excessive strain and stress. Another argument is the paradoxical detachment. Baldick (2001) gives almost the same examples of comic relief that Abrams gives. The first is the inebriated porter’s speech which openly contradicts with the news of the king’s murder in *Macbeth*. The other example is the gravediggers asking riddles while digging Ophelia’s

resting place in *Hamlet*. Baldick (2001) claims that comic relief can be found in the works of many other playwrights of Shakespeare's time. It is also found in prose works, for example, Malcolm Lowry's 1947 novel *Under the Volcano*, which Lowry himself calls a comedy, even a farce.

Edward Quinn (2006), similar to Baldick (2001), expands the scope of his interpretation and includes nondramatic works of literature in his definition of comic relief. While Abrams's illustration of the term tends to be confined to dramatic works, both Baldick (2001) and Quinn (2006) welcome nontheatrical pieces as potential samples of comic relief. Quinn (2006) argues that comic relief adjusts the atmosphere and alleviates pressure and stress. However, as Quinn (2006) remarks, it should be noted that it would be something of a misnomer to refer to "a lessening of the tragic effect" (p. 88) as comic relief. Talking about the same canonical examples, Quinn (2006) believes that humour builds up and strengthens the misfortune and catastrophe that cause great suffering or destruction of the tragic character. Comic relief, Quinn (2006) asserts, grants the audience the chance to detect and examine the performance from different perspectives. For Quinn (2006), the conversation between the gravediggers in *Hamlet* introduces an alternative meaning of the whole play for the masses. Quinn (2006) says, "The gravedigger's comment that he began digging graves on the same day that 'our last king overcame Fortinbras ... that very day that young Hamlet was born, he that is mad and sent to England' reconceives the entire action of the play from the perspective of the common man" (p. 88). In a tragic literary work characterised by the calamitous and unfortunate, Quinn (2006) argues that comic relief occurs when the humorous is apposed and paired with the painful and pitiful. Flannery O'Connor, "whose comic characters frequently meet tragic ends" (Quinn, 2006, p. 88), is given in Quinn's discussion as an example of this technique.

J. A. Cuddon's (2013) definition of comic relief points out humorous chapters and intervals of a tragic play which are intended to reduce the anxiety and unease. Although it sounds paradoxical, Cuddon (2013) asserts that comic relief also serves to enhance the catastrophic feature of the performance. According to Cuddon (2013), any dramatic component characterised by comic relief is to be the essential and fundamental ingredient of the entire product. If comic relief is not built in humorous chapters and intervals, Cuddon (2013) argues that it may develop as assertions, statements or reflections which again reduce the strength of the sensitive and responsive tone. Comic relief generates humour which aims to be satirical and mocking. Besides the representative examples of the term in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, Cuddon (2013) specifies the unbelievable simplicity of manipulating Roderigo in *Othello*, Hamlet's direct and whimsical approach to Polonius, Rosencrantz, Guildenstern and Osric in *Hamlet*, the Fool's disguised mockery of King Lear for leaving his power and land to her daughters in *King Lear*. Cuddon (2013) believes that other notable examples of comic relief are to be found in Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* in terms of the characters Robin and Rafe whose portrayals contrast with the serious and tragic nature of the play – the "almost slapstick ... and buffoonish comedy" (Cuddon, 2013, p. 171), John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* and *The White Devil* in relation to the black humour inherent in both plays, and Cyril Tourneur's *The Revenger's Tragedy* and *The Atheist's Tragedy*. Besides the above examples, Cuddon (2013) claims that Mystery Plays are the examples where the early practice of comic relief is observed. Cuddon (2013) highlights the careless everyday talk of the soldiers just before crucifying Christ. Though it is not noted in Cuddon's (2013) argument, it may further be argued that Mak's farcical punishment for stealing sheep introduces such instances in *The Second Shephard's Play*.

A. F. Scott (1985) draws attention to the sobriety of the action and finds comic relief having the role to alter the disturbing and pitiful character of the scene. Similar to Cuddon's (2013) comments about the paradoxical role that comic relief plays, Scott (1985) claims that comic relief strengthens the magnitude of what is pitiable and ruinous in the theme. He reminds the readers of one of the canonical examples of comic relief pointing out the infamous porter scene in *Macbeth*.

In his definition of comic relief, Martin Gray (1985) underscores humorous scenes, episodes, characters, discussions and dialogues "in a serious work, even a tragedy, for the purpose of contrast" (p. 49). As it is evident in his interpretation, comic relief as a literary device is not unique to tragedy as a genre. It is observed as parts of prose works as well. Gray (1985) cites the almost authorised examples, the drunken porter's speech in *Macbeth* and the conversations of the gravediggers in *Hamlet*. As Gray (1985) illustrates, in the former, comic relief "brings back the world of normality after the murder of Duncan" (p. 49). In the latter, it offers the audience "a lull in the action that prepares for the funeral of Ophelia" (p. 49). Gray (1985) makes a comparison between the roles that comic relief and suspense play in literary works. He sees suspense as the "swift manipulation of the audience's feelings" (p. 49) since suspense as a literary device suggests confusion, tension and uncertainty. Comic relief, on the other hand, "can overbalance a play" (Gray, 1985, p. 49), for the manipulative power of the term becomes discernable when it provides a stark contrast to the fear and pity the audience feels. Gray (1985) argues that in *Doctor Faustus* the distressing power of the storyline is modified by severe ludicrousness inherent in action.

H. L. Yelland, S. C. J. Jones and K. S. W. Easton (1966) look at comic relief from a broader perspective and do not specify a literary genre or type to which this term is peculiar. According to them, any humorous episode or event of a narrative with a sober mood characterises comic relief. However, it is also pointed out in their discussion that comic relief is mostly used as a dramatic term. The reason that any scene of comic relief is inserted into the story is to offer to the audience relief from anxiety and unease. Yelland, Jones and Easton (1966) cite the English author and literary Critic Thomas De Quincey's (1785-1859) 1823 essay "On the Knocking at the Gate in *Macbeth*" as a canonical reference to the notion of comic relief in English Literature. According to them, De Quincey reads the porter scene as relaxation and remedy after the thematic anxiety about the king's murder. In addition, they claim that Mercutio's lack of interest in Romeo's love and passion in *Romeo and Juliet* presents one of the best examples of comic relief.

Harry Shaw (1976) asserts that an episode, assertion or saying which takes place during a painful and pitiful literary or dramatic presentation is known as comic relief. For Shaw (1976), the formation of comic relief in the storyline is intentional, for the dramatist or writer wilfully intends to lower the anxiety of the audience. As it has been argued by other critics, Shaw (1976) highlights the adverse role of comic relief to strengthen, intensify and accentuate the gravity and affliction of the performance. According to Shaw (1976), it is especially in Shakespeare's plays that scenes or incidents which appertain to comic relief enhance the tragic significance of the narrative. *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet*, and *Macbeth* are given by Shaw (1976) as almost the best canonical examples of comic relief.

Peter Auger's (2010) surprisingly concise definition describes comic relief as "a light-hearted moment within a serious-minded work" (p. 55). Auger (2010) claims that comic relief as a term is transparent enough to be illustrated as "a piece of slapstick, a small farce or a whole subplot" (p. 55). Although jig as a term becomes a part of Hamlet's challenge and objection to her

mother's marriage after the king's death in *Hamlet* Act III Scene ii, Auger (2010) considers jigs, which are comic performances in terms of songs, dances and pantomimes in Elizabethan drama, as examples of comic relief. According to Auger (2010), a jig functions exactly as comic relief does. The use of comic relief is due to the dramatist's intention to decrease the anxiety of the audience. Auger (2010) claims that comic relief also clarifies, criticises or satirises the narrative.

X. J. Kennedy, Dana Gioia and Mark Bauerlein (2006) point out the typical contrast between the humorous character of comic relief and the seriousness of the storyline in general. According to them, what defines comic relief is the rise of entertaining scenes or types during a serious presentation. Kennedy, Gioia and Bauerlein (2006) argue that the function of comic relief is to alleviate the problem and equalise the tension between the serious and the hilarious. Although comic relief is evidently cheerful and incidental, the writers draw attention to the fact that comic relief has sometimes an adverse effect on the topical magnitude and weight. In *Doctor Faustus*, they argue that Faustus's seemingly bold and courageous confrontation with Mephistopheles is challenged and almost ridiculed by the absurd and ridiculous buffoonery of the servant and clown. As illustrated by the other critics, Kennedy, Gioia and Bauerlein (2006) spell out how the scene of the drunken porter in *Macbeth* provides comic relief and at the same time strengthens the terror of the king's murder. Analogous to the allusions of Yelland, Jones and Easton (1966) to De Quincey's "On the Knocking at the Gate in *Macbeth*," Kennedy, Gioia and Bauerlein (2006) read the essay from a similar perspective and conclude that since the audience is held by the fear of the murder, the everyday and normal are to be re-established.

Food and cooking as comic relief

In sharp contrast to the gloomy atmosphere and the remote and menacing setting (Tucker, 1986) of the main story, cooking and eating provide Charles in *The Sea, the Sea* with undeniable enjoyment and pleasure that he makes recommendations and gives advice about the way one should consume food. He says he eats and drinks slowly and without distractions. He enjoys eating so much that he asserts "how fortunate we are to be food-consuming animals. Every meal should be a treat and one ought to bless every day which brings with it a good digestion and the precious gift of hunger" (Murdoch, 1999, p. 8).

When Charles cooks food, he details how he prepares the food to be eaten. He tells the reader if he heats it in a particular way, such as baking or boiling, or if he heats his food until it is ready to eat. For example, he accentuates that for lunch he had and extremely relished "anchovy paste on hot buttered toast, then baked beans and kidney beans with chopped celery, tomatoes, lemon juice and olive oil" (Murdoch, 1999, p. 8). In order to make his appetising dish more enjoyable, Charles emphasises the undeniable significance of good olive oil. In addition, he believes that his enjoyment of eating would be amplified if he could add some green peppers to the ingredients. He sadly says the grocer in the neighbouring village does not provide any. Charles cooks "bananas and cream with white sugar" (Murdoch, 1999, p. 8). However, he strictly recommends that in order to guarantee a top quality flavour, bananas must be cut, not meshed. In his list of ingredients are "hard water-biscuits with New Zealand butter and Wensleydale cheese" (Murdoch, 1999, p. 8). Charles reveals that he never uses chesses from overseas markets. He believes that cheese from domestic markets has the best taste. Charles's table is so exceptional that he says "With this feast, I drank most of a bottle of Muscadet out of my modest 'cellar'" (Murdoch, 1999, p. 8).

Charles has been expecting to have some letters sent by some of his old friends. However, since the day he moved to Narrowdean, he has had no letters at all. His disillusionment and unhappiness are notable in this short remark: “still no letters” (Murdoch, 1999, p. 17). Charles cooks in order to cheer himself up. For his lunch Charles prepares “lentil soup, followed by chipolata sausages served with boiled onions and apples stewed in tea, then dried apricots and shortcake biscuits: a light Beaujolais” (Murdoch, 1999, p. 17). It is only after the emotional relief that cooking and eating give him and the reader as well, Charles asserts “I feel better” (Murdoch, 1999, p. 17). What follows is the happiness and pleasure that cooking and eating bring him. Charles enjoys making any comments about gastronomy. He says, for example, “fresh apricots are best of course, but the dried kind, soaked for twenty-four hours and then well drained, make a heavenly accompaniment for any sort of mildly sweet biscuit or cake. They are especially good with anything made of almonds, and thus consort happily with red wine. I am not a great friend of your peach, but I suspect the apricot is the king of fruit” (Murdoch, 1999, p. 17).

Whenever Charles feels uneasy about a particular situation, cooking and eating offer him comfort making him feel better when he is sad or worried. After Charles sees a “grotesquely huge fat fleshy spider emerging from the larder” (Murdoch, 1999, p. 26) which makes him “utterly horrified” (Murdoch, 1999, p. 26), he cooks. He prepares “kipper fillets rapidly unfrozen in boiling water ... garnished with lemon juice, oil, and a light sprinkling of dry herbs” (Murdoch, 1999, p. 27). He never hesitates to make comments about the food he prepares. He believes that kipper fillets are a better choice than smoked salmon. With this fish, Charles says one must have “fried tinned new potatoes” (Murdoch, 1999, p. 27). He considers potatoes as a small piece of food eaten in addition to his usual meals. A further choice Charles makes for the table is “Welsh rarebit and hot beetroot” (Murdoch, 1999, p. 27) in which, he says, the “shop sliced bread is less than great, but all right toasted, with good salty New Zealand butter” (Murdoch, 1999, p. 27). He feels happier when he tells the reader that he tends to prefer “a wide variety of those crackly Scandinavian biscuits which are supposed to make [one] thin” (Murdoch, 1999, p. 27).

Whenever the tension rises depressing and troubling enough in Murdoch’s narrative, Charles’s cooking and eating scenes serve as comic relief in which the elevated anxiety is opposed and balanced by Charles’s happiness of and indulgence in preparing and consuming good food. Charles acknowledges this when he says, “felt a little depressed but was cheered up by supper” (Murdoch, 1999, p. 29). What particularly cheers him up when he feels desolate and unhappy is “spaghetti with a little butter and dried basil ... Then spring cabbage cooked slowly with dill. Boiled onions served with bran, herbs, soya oil and tomatoes, with one egg beaten in. With these, a slice or two of cold tinned corned beef” (Murdoch, 1999, p. 29). He does not forget to add that he finds basil the king of herbs. Besides, a slice of meat is to be necessary for eating so much vegetable and herb.

Charles’s lost love Hartley is his biggest disillusionment in his life, for she illuminates his cave-like mind (Nicol, 1996). As a result, any memory of her or the days Charles was with her inflict harm on him. As soon as Charles is disturbed by such memories since Hartley now means turbulence and collapse (Denham, 2001), the activity of preparing food assists and comforts him. Charles prepares “frankfurters with scrambled eggs, grilled tomatoes and a slight touch of garlic, then shop treacle tart squeezed with lemon juice and covered with yoghurt and thick cream” (Murdoch, 1999, p. 34). As his disturbance is relieved by preparing and cooking food, he says he

“started to make a border round my lawn with the pretty stones which [he has] collected” (Murdoch, 1999, p. 34).

The expression and the mood of the episodes of Charles's descriptions of the foods that he uses in the preparation of a particular dish stand in sharp contrast to his spirit in general. The sense of alienation and loneliness that may lead to the “condition of otherness” (Balkaya, 2020, p. 724) illustrates the overall character of his adventure and story. On the contrary, his language and vocabulary alter significantly when he prepares food and eats. It is his dinner for which he “had an egg poached in hot scrambled egg, then the coley braised with onions and lightly dusted with curry powder, and served with a little tomato ketchup and mustard” (Murdoch, 1999, p. 58).

What surprises the reader is how Charles finds pleasure and relaxation in preparing and eating food. What should follow the above recipe is “a heavenly rice pudding” (Murdoch, 1999, p. 58). At another time, after “poached egg on nettles” (Murdoch, 1999, p. 60), Charles “feasted on” (Murdoch, 1999, p. 60) scones, butter and raspberry jam. In another illustration, the favourable mood of the scene is obvious. Charles says he prepared his “heavenly vegetarian stew of onions, carrots, tomatoes, bran, lentils, pearl barley, vegetable protein, brown sugar and olive oil” (Murdoch, 1999, p. 75). The foods he prepares and consumes are all appetising, delightful and enjoyable. He describes his dish as delicious and sublime.

Charles's memories of the past are painful enough to give him and the reader enough misery. When Charles recalls the old days when he was with Hartley, he says, “I shake and tremble as I write” (Murdoch, 1999, p. 93). The effect of this mental stress is counteracted by the scenes in which Charles prepares and consumes food, which performs the purpose of comic relief. It is right after the memory of Hartley that Charles cooks and eats. He describes his “orange feast” (Murdoch, 1999, p. 93) as “three oranges [that] should be eaten in solitude and as a treat when one is feeling hungry” (Murdoch, 1999, p. 93). He adds that oranges “are too messy and overwhelming to form part of an ordinary meal” (Murdoch, 1999, p. 93).

Conclusion

As a literary term, comic relief refers to the appearance of funny and humorous episodes and scenes in serious literary works. The aim of the existence of such amusing and entertaining scenes is to relieve or balance the intensity of the psychological restlessness and uneasiness which are brought about by the action in the story. Most of the critics who theorise about this term claim that comic relief strengthens the catastrophic effect of the tragic storyline on the audience. Shakespeare's tragedies, *Macbeth* and *Hamlet* in particular, are seen as models where the best examples of comic relief are seen. Both the porter in *Macbeth* and the gravediggers in *Hamlet* perform the function of providing the audience with ease and relief. The loss of King Duncan and Ophelia induces enough distress for the audience in both plays that the comic relief brought about by the porter and the gravediggers counteracts the effect of the tragic news.

Although M. H. Abrams (1999) illustrates comic relief mostly as a theatrical device, other critics like C. Baldick (2001), Edward Quinn (2006) and Martin Gray (1985) draw attention to the use of the term in prose works as well. Comic relief as a literary device is by no means limited to a specific genre or type of literature. Examples of the use of the term can be found in every fictional narrative. Iris Murdoch's 1978 novel *The Sea, the Sea* is one of these compositions where a unique

practice of comic relief is visible. The episodes and scenes of the novel in which Murdoch's protagonist cheerfully prepares food are the instances of comic relief.

Murdoch's *The Sea, the Sea* tells a sad story of an aging artist who believes that a new life in a small coastal village will bring him the opportunity to find peace and harmony to compose his autobiography. It is because of this that the retired playwright and theatrical director Charles Arrowby leaves his glittering London life behind and settles in the seashore village Narrowdean. He expects to find enough rest and silence in order to recollect the past memory and write an autobiography. He believes that this small village will provide him with mental tranquillity.

By contrast, starting from the first day of his life in the village, Charles's life becomes even more troubled. What troubles him first is his sudden feeling of loneliness. The change is so swift and enormous that Charles is unable to adjust himself to this new way of life. He wants to know the reason why his friends do not send him letters. He asks himself if his friends do not wonder where Charles lives now. He repeats the names of his friends one by one calling them in his mind with their nicknames. He remembers the past, he remembers how his days were filled with adventure and excitement.

In addition, life in a dark and damp house where there is no electricity is not what Charles is accustomed to living. It is sometimes so cold inside that Charles goes to bed to warm himself up. There are common pests inside, which sometimes truly scares and perplexes him (Jordan, 2012). He considers making some changes. He asks himself if the buying of the house was a good decision. Later in the story, some of his friends, either in their letters or to his face, say that Charles will never find happiness and satisfaction in this village.

Besides loneliness and alienation, Charles's recollections of his teenage love Hartley trouble and torment him deeply. His mind is never free from the images of her, which becomes his mental suffering throughout his story. Therefore, every single food and cooking scene in Charles's story is an example of comic relief to reduce the strength of the tension that both Charles and his reader feel. As Charles takes great pleasure in food and cooking, such scenes generate enough comfort and even humour not only for himself but also for his reader.

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