

Explicit Intertextual Connections in Driscoll's *Her Perfect Family*: A Reader-Centric Analysis

Teresa Driscoll'un *Her Perfect Family* Adlı Eserinde Açık Metinlerarası Bağlantılar:
Okur Merkezli Bir Analiz

Ajda Baştan*

Sivas Cumhuriyet University

Abstract

This study examines explicit intertextuality and its impact on the reader in Teresa Driscoll's crime novel, *Her Perfect Family*, published in late 2021. Julia Kristeva's theory of intertextuality stands as a significant milestone in postmodernist literature, positing that any new text is inevitably influenced or enriched by prior writings. British author Driscoll employs explicit intertextuality throughout the work, incorporating references to renowned English writers such as George Eliot, Thomas Hardy, Charles Dickens, Charlotte Brontë, D.H. Lawrence, Mary Shelley, and Lewis Carroll in various chapters. As a result, the reader perceives a connection between these authors and the chapters, contributing to the overall reading experience. It becomes evident that Driscoll, as a contemporary postmodernist novelist, draws from the themes and characters of these established literary figures to enhance the intricacies of her plot. By providing clues and insights relevant to the contemporary context, the author cleverly weaves explicit intertextual references into the narrative, engaging readers in a process akin to solving a puzzle, and creating connections. Moreover, Driscoll assumes the role of an instructor, posing critical questions about the aforementioned acclaimed authors, their works, and their characters. This approach makes the reader feel like a student, encouraging them to establish intertextual connections in *Her Perfect Family* and to understand the plot more easily.

Keywords: Her Perfect Family, intertextuality, Julia Kristeva, postmodernism, Teresa Driscoll

Öz

Bu çalışma, 2021 yılı sonlarında yayımlanan Teresa Driscoll'un suç romanı *Her Perfect Family*'deki açık metinlerarasılığın okuyucu üzerindeki etkisini incelemektedir. Julia Kristeva'nın metinlerarasılık kuramı, postmodernist edebiyatta önemli bir kilometre taşı olarak kabul edilir ve herhangi bir yeni metnin önceki yazılardan kaçınılmaz şekilde etkilendiğini veya onlardan beslendiğini öne sürer. Driscoll, eserinde ustalıklı açık metinlerarasılıktan yararlanarak George Eliot, Thomas Hardy, Charles Dickens, Charlotte Brontë, D.H. Lawrence, Mary Shelley ve Lewis Carroll gibi ünlü İngiliz yazarlara atıflar yapmaktadır. Çağdaş bir postmodern romancı olarak, Driscoll bu tanınmış edebi figürlerin temalarından ve karakterlerinden yararlanarak olay örgüsünü zenginleştirmektedir. Böylece okuyucu, adı geçen yazarlarla eserin bölümleri arasında bir bağlantı kurarak romanın bütününden daha fazla keyif alabilmektedir. Yazar, çağdaş bağlama uygun ipuçları ve anlayışlar sunarak metinlerarası referansları ustalıklı öyküye işlemekte ve okuyucuyu bir bulmaca çözme ve anlam oluşturma sürecine dâhil etmektedir. Ayrıca Driscoll, söz konusu ünlü yazarlar, eserleri ve karakterleri hakkında eleştirel sorular sorarak bir öğretmen rolünü üstlenmektedir. Bu yaklaşım, okura kendini bir öğrenci gibi hissettirerek *Her Perfect Family*'de metinlerarası bağlantılar kurmasını ve olay örgüsünü daha kolay anlamasını sağlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Her Perfect Family, metinlerarasılık, Julia Kristeva, postmodernism, Teresa Driscoll

*Asst. Prof. Dr., Faculty of Tourism, Sivas Cumhuriyet University

ORCID# 0000-0001-8171-8644; abastan@cumhuriyet.edu.tr; <https://doi.org/10.47777/cankujhss>

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Introduction: On Modernism and Postmodernism

The concepts of modernism, postmodernism, and contemporary exist in the intellectual and artistic realms, each with distinct characteristics. Contemporary encapsulates the current moment and exhibits intricate connections with both modernism and postmodernism. To distinguish between modernism and postmodernism, it is crucial to recognize their subtle differences. Postmodernism, as the name implies, is not a mere successor but a nuanced reaction to the long-standing modernist tradition, rooted in the Enlightenment era of the 18th century (Tarescavage, 2020, p. 1) and even extending back to the Renaissance. This movement evolved not as a complete replacement but as a distinct approach, primarily aimed at comprehending the literature and art of the 20th century. Contrary to common beliefs that its inception occurred in the aftermath of modernism, particularly in the wake of the Second World War (Albright, 2018), postmodernism has a significant emphasis on the period following 1980.

Modernism, a concept coined in the 1900s, still holds relevance in numerous cultural and commercial spheres in the 21st century. While some may consider modernism and postmodernism to be purely artistic trends, they encompass a far broader range of societal issues (Firat and Venkadesh, 1995, p. 239). Modernism is rooted in the belief that life has an objective purpose. According to modernists, humanity's goal is to unravel the secrets of the planet and the universe. They prioritize aesthetics, values, and ethics over politics and maintain an optimistic outlook on life. Many remarkable modernist works in art, literature, music, architecture, poetry, and science have received attention and praise due to their elegance and simplicity. However, the outbreak of World War I instilled scepticism in modernist novelists such as Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, and D. H. Lawrence, leading to a widespread pessimistic tone in their works.

Postmodernism, in contrast, is a way of thinking that explores to deny any particular character of all sorts of privileges and to reject the consensus of taste. It originated as an artistic trend and evolved to take on social and political significance, as is often the case with transformative ideas (Bishop, 1996). Profound and radical changes occurred in the final decades of the 20th century which had an impact on politics, the economy, society, the arts, and literature as well. The progress in technology, music, art, and literature characterizes the postmodern era, serving as a reflection of the state of people in the most economically developed societies. Postmodernism first appeared as a philosophical term in the 1979 work *The Postmodern Condition* by the French intellectual Jean François Lyotard (Browning, 2014). He stated that different groups of people use the same language in distinct ways, implying that they can arrive at a somewhat diverse and personal view of the world (Lyotard, 1984). However, postmodernism lacks a precise definition since there is no consensus on what the term exactly means. Powell, for instance, describes postmodernism as “an attempt to make sense of what is going on now” (1998, p. 17). From my perspective, postmodernism is a system of thought which tries to reveal the reasons that restrict people's freedom and equality in the present era. In this regard, movements such as feminism align with postmodern principles by advocating for equal rights between women and men. Furthermore, feminism is considered postmodern because it asserts that “differences exist to be respected and contribute to multiplicity and polyphony” (Gündar, 2022, p. 870).

Lyotard (1984, p. xxiv) defines postmodernism as a sense of incredulity resulting from scientific advancement. Furthermore, he contends that everything we have learned thus far should be met with suspicion (Lyotard, 1984, p. 79). Consequently, the concept of origins has typically been met with scepticism in postmodernist thought (Sheehan, 2004, p. 20; Kuznar, 1997, p. 95). Thus, postmodernism rejects the pursuit of absolute truth, logical

reasoning, and precise definitions within individual sciences, favouring complete deviation instead. According to Jameson (1984, p. vii), postmodernism signifies a fundamental departure from dominant cultural and aesthetic norms and the emergence of new socioeconomic structural elements. In this light, postmodernism stands in opposition to the ideals of progress, science, and technology. Consequently, authors within this framework are sceptical of emerging technologies, perceiving them as a potential threat to individuals seeking their own identity and place in the world. This outlook on technology represents a marked departure from previous decades when machinery was celebrated as a source of salvation. While it may have seemed that postmodernity waned in influence during the first decade of the 21st century, Kester (2018, p. 1330) posits that postmodernity, in conjunction with modernity, is experiencing a clear revival following the 2016 UK and US elections.

Postmodern literature is influenced by the transformations brought about by a globalized and digitized society, while simultaneously paying respect to the great narratives and philosophers of the past, whose contributions remain relevant even today. For example, Butler (2002, pp. 2-3) notes that postmodernists often draw inspiration from Karl Marx and have a heightened awareness of the unique state of contemporary society, which they refer to as the 'postmodern condition'. Building upon this, poststructuralist theorist Julia Kristeva (1986, p. 37) argued in 1966 that there is nothing truly new to write about and coined the term 'intertextuality' to describe the phenomenon of all new writing being a combination of existing texts. Thus, intertextuality, in the context of literature, refers to the utilization of written texts in various forms, such as implicit or explicit references, allusions, parodies, and quotations, creating a network of interconnected works. Scholars like Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, Philippe Sollers, and Jacques Derrida have further developed the concept of intertextuality, which greatly influenced postmodernist literature and criticism (Orr, 2010, p. 1).

On the other hand, intertextual reading by the reader involves recognizing, exploring, and interpreting the relationships and connections between the text they are currently reading and other texts, whether they are literary works, historical documents, cultural references, or even personal experiences (Akdal and Şahin, 2014). It is an active and analytical approach to reading that goes beyond the surface of the text to understand how it interacts with the broader literary and cultural context. When a reader engages in intertextual reading, they are actively seeking out these relationships and using them to create a deeper understanding of the text at hand. According to Hartman, when a reader is actively creating meaning from a text, they establish intertextual connections between different textual elements to suit a specific context. In this process, the reader borrows, adjusts, adopts, and reshapes various text components within their own mental framework (Hartman, 1992, p. 298).

Various linguistic stylistic devices, including expressive language and engaging formulations, are employed in postmodern literature. Narratives are not always presented in chronological order, and multiple narrative threads often coexist within a work. Furthermore, through the use of periodic time jumps, readers are challenged to reconstruct the plot themselves. It is worth noting that the novel genre has been particularly popular among postmodern British women writers, such as J.K. Rowling, Doris Lessing, Zadie Smith, and Teresa Driscoll, who have made significant contributions to postmodern literature.

Teresa Driscoll's Postmodern Novel: *Her Perfect Family*

Teresa Driscoll is a notable writer of the 21st century known for her postmodernist approach in crafting novels. She began making a name for herself in British literature with

the publication of her first book *Recipes for Melissa* in 2014¹. While not all of her novels adhere strictly to postmodernism, it is possible to identify postmodernist elements in the majority of her works. Driscoll's seventh novel, *Her Perfect Family*, was published at the end of 2021 and swiftly became a best-seller. This postmodern work serves as a response to a world perceived as chaotic, where objective facts are challenging to communicate, and independent literary reality is elusive. The novel is structured in the whodunit genre, keeping readers in suspense until the very end as detectives strive to uncover the perpetrator. As previously mentioned, the profound changes in nearly every aspect of human life and the rapidly advancing technology are central concerns in postmodernism. Within this framework, scepticism about technology emerges as a dominant theme, seen as a threat to human survival within the novel. Driscoll endeavours to illustrate that the world is on the brink of destruction or may have already sustained irreparable damage.

Her Perfect Family is a suspenseful psychological thriller spanning sixty-nine chapters, providing insight into the past and present lives of the family members. This narrative technique, characterized by frequent time jumps, is a hallmark of postmodern writing, often leaving readers in a state of confusion. However, the novel commences with a prologue and concludes with an epilogue, enriching the reader's experience with additional information. Rachel and Edward Hartley eagerly await their daughter's graduation from the university, anticipating it as one of the happiest days for their close-knit family. Unfortunately, this joyous occasion takes a tragic turn when Gemma stumbles and falls on the stage, revealing that she has been shot and is now fighting for her life. As Gemma remains in a coma in the hospital, the identity of her attacker remains shrouded in mystery, leaving the reader suspicious of various characters.

In postmodern literature, authors often assume an active role within the narrative, akin to Driscoll in *Her Perfect Family*. They write their narratives by meticulously organizing and directing events in a distinct, non-linear, and fragmentary style. This approach compels readers of Driscoll's work to assemble the narrative themselves, resembling a patchwork quilt or Frankenstein's monster, where the pieces may appear jumbled. The intricate storyline and the absence of clear character identities in the novel are emblematic of postmodern literature. As mentioned before, the theory of intertextuality developed by Kristeva greatly contributes to the complexity of the plot in postmodern works. This theory posits that newly written texts inevitably bear the imprint of previously written ones. In Driscoll's writing, intertextuality takes centre stage as a defining element of the postmodern novel. By incorporating references to several renowned writers throughout her work, Driscoll aims to make the plot more accessible to readers. However, intentionally, she at times includes references unrelated to the central themes of her novel, such as her allusion to Beckett in chapter 19: "Waiting for Godot – did Samuel Beckett truly write for performance or did his work pose restrictions for actors and directors? Discuss" (Driscoll, 2021, p. 155).² This deliberate choice disrupts the plot and introduces confusion to the reader's experience, aligning with a common objective in postmodern literature.

Driscoll's novel incorporates several postmodern elements, offering a multi-layered reading experience. Most notably, the characters in the book frequently engage in interior monologues, allowing readers to access their inner thoughts and perspectives. Each character's worldview is influenced by a myriad of circumstances, contributing to a rich

¹ On her official website, Teresa Driscoll reveals that her dream of becoming a novelist has been alive since her primary school years. After more than two decades as a journalist and presenter for the BBC, as well as a columnist for various newspapers and magazines, she released her debut novel. For more information, please visit <https://www.teresadriscoll.com>.

² All quotes from *Her Perfect Family* are presented in their original format in this article.

narrative tapestry. Throughout *Her Perfect Family*, a prevailing sense of fear and pervasive mistrust permeates the lives of the characters. This underlying atmosphere establishes a predominant tone of pessimism and scepticism, highlighting the theme that appearances can be deceiving.

On the other hand, it is crucial to note that Driscoll's work, while portraying the negative aspects of the contemporary world, refrains from presenting clear-cut solutions, a characteristic often found in postmodern literature. The protagonist, Gemma, exemplifies the unconventional nature of postmodern literature, as she does not conform to the traditional heroic or sympathetic character. Instead, she is portrayed as an individual with ethical ambiguities and a notable lack of positive development throughout the narrative. Gemma's character also grapples with profound insecurity, evident in her unwarranted fears and persistent anxiety about being under surveillance, a theme that signifies the constraints on personal freedom. Her belief that both her ex-boyfriend Alex and others are monitoring her actions adds another layer of complexity to her character and further underscores the postmodern elements within the novel.

Destruction by New Technologies

As previously mentioned, a common theme in postmodern works is the perception of people feeling threatened by new technologies, which leads them to question their place in the contemporary world. In *Her Perfect Family*, technology is depicted as a source of endangerment. Similar to Driscoll, postmodern writers such as April De Angelis, Thomas Pynchon, and J.G. Ballard often express scepticism towards technological advancements and critique their impact. Besides, the rapid development of information technologies has resulted in new forms of communication and interaction. Individuals now have quick access to information through digital platforms, and online environments have largely replaced face-to-face communication in the 21st century. This shift has raised concerns about the widespread availability of private information and the potential for unwanted intrusions, as noted by Heise (2004, p. 140).

Furthermore, the global spread of technology and the internet has given rise to new threats, such as computer hacking, as pointed out by Chua and Holt (2016, p. 534). Consequently, the abundance of technological opportunities also brings forth certain problems for humanity. One example of the high level of opportunities afforded by technology is the ease of accessing vast amounts of information through search engines and online databases. However, this abundance of information access can also lead to difficulties in discerning reliable sources. Additionally, the proliferation of social media platforms has facilitated instant communication and connection with others worldwide. Nevertheless, this constant connectivity has also raised concerns about personal privacy, cyberbullying, and the addictive nature of social media (Griffiths and Kuss, 2017, p. 50).

The majority of people use the internet, their smartphones, and social media because these platforms offer cutting-edge means of communication and information sharing in the 21st century. Private conversations or group chats are common ways for people to communicate with their friends and family, making it simpler and easier to rapidly exchange ideas. Social meta-processes like individualization, encourage the need for sociability and a social community. Digital media, like Facebook, have a significant impact on our daily lives and, as a result, on our communication because of their universality and constant distribution (Dhiman, 2023, p. 1; Güney, 2023, p. 83). Thus, Facebook is merely one of many internet-based programs with the ability to connect its users virtually, regardless of place or time. Indeed, Facebook is similar to a social space where users interact with one another, go about their daily lives, and allow other users to be a part of those activities (Karlsen and Aalberg, 2023, p. 144). It is now impossible to imagine a culture without social media, and

as a result, cultural and media change are closely related to each other. In addition, technological advancements like digitization cannot be solely blamed for a changing media culture.

One of the highlighted themes in *Her Perfect Family* is online crime via Facebook, that is frequently used by Gemma. The term 'online crime' as a postmodern problem has been around since the beginning of the 21st century. With its disadvantages as well as benefits, the developing technology has produced this new form of crime. In general, online crime refers to the misuse of communication channels such as WhatsApp, SMS, email, and social media like "Facebook, Twitter, and Google Plus" (Ariel and Avidar, 2015, p. 19) by one or more people. It is a type of violence, extremely harmful, and an antisocial behaviour that has long-term and far-reaching negative effects. In this sense, online crime is a non-physical form of violation that occurs within social media. There are a number of emerging definitions for social media, both within the communication domain and in connection with other fields like "public relations, information science, and mass media" (Carr and Hayes, 2015, p. 47). As Bentz et al. (2021, p. 55) indicate, social media offers regular people a simple way to connect with breaking news, and a constant stream of information. In this context, social media is internet-based digital technology (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010) that assists users in connecting with others, exchanging ideas, and learning about new information. Thus, social media, in contrast to traditional media, enables anyone to create content together with adding contributions and comments.

In *Her Perfect Family*, Gemma's boyfriend successfully breaks her social media account password. As a result, Alex has been accessing Gemma's private messages and pictures without her knowledge or approval (Driscoll, 2021, p. 72). This online crime, which manifests as an intrusion into Gemma's personal life makes her feel embarrassed and monitored, and her psychology deteriorates. Driscoll emphasizes in this framework that online crime, which is commonly underestimated or not acknowledged as much, can have a long-term negative impact on the victim's health in romantic relationships. For this reason, Driscoll's *Her Perfect Family* displays how technology can be misused for spying, tyranny, or domination. As Driscoll demonstrates in her novel, online crime is an ever-increasing threat, with implications for individuals, especially for women and girls, and society as a whole. So far, actions have been insufficient, and the cross-border nature of gender-based online crime has not been adequately addressed. Also, because the situation has potentially worsened during the coronavirus pandemic, Driscoll³ reveals how people's social lives have changed and why they are online much more than before.

It can be concluded that Teresa Driscoll's novel, *Her Perfect Family*, is an illustrative representation of postmodern individuals who have been exposed to online crime in the digital age. In the work, the main character, Gemma, explains the effects of crime on social media in plain words. Eventually, she experiences oppression and suffering due to these troubling circumstances, leading to the development of a mental illness like paranoia (Driscoll, 2021, p. 71). Gemma firmly believes that she is continuously being watched or followed by others in both the real and online environment. Moreover, she becomes obsessed with constantly changing her social media password and stops sending online messages to her friends, expressing, "I don't use DMs⁴ anymore, just to be on the safe side. I wish I'd taken the whole security side of social media more seriously before now" (Driscoll, 2021, p. 301). Shandler and Gomez (2022, pp. 4-6) report that online attacks elicit emotions of anger, anxiety, and dread. Consequently, the increasing occurrence of online crimes

³ It is highly possible that Driscoll wrote *Her Perfect Family* during the coronavirus pandemic which started in 2020.

⁴ DM is a direct message send via social media.

isolates their victims from society and even leads them to experience depression due to the psychological pressure imposed upon them. Driscoll effectively practices social media criticism by highlighting its negative impact on mental health and its constraints on individual freedom.

A further criticism of technology that Driscoll presents in her novel is related to mobile phones. According to the author, these commonly used technological devices enable and contribute to the occurrence of infidelity in marriages, which ultimately leads to the breakdown of society. In the novel, Sam⁵, who is already married to a pregnant wife, and Gemma arrange their secret dates through mobile phone messaging. Gemma confesses this by saying, “he normally texts the name of a hotel, different each time, and I meet him in the room. Not in the bar, in case we get unlucky and anyone sees us. To be perfectly honest, I’ve hated this because it feels sort of dirty and seedy and underhand” (Driscoll, 2021, p. 216).

As observed in the quoted passage, Gemma’s emotions in her relationship with Sam are a complex mix of sadness, shame, and embarrassment. This emotional turmoil stems from the clandestine nature of their meetings, often in different hotels, with Sam always texting her the location. Gemma’s discomfort with these secret encounters is evident in her description of them as dirty, seedy, and underhand. Furthermore, this situation reflects the ease with which Sam is able to arrange these meetings, thanks to the convenience of modern technology and mobile apps. It is known that mobile applications provide numerous practical uses, but they also open the door to potential misuse, as seen in Sam’s secretive hotel rendezvous. Additionally, Driscoll seems to emphasize the vulnerability of pregnant wives to potential infidelity by their husbands.

Explicit Intertextuality in *Her Perfect Family*

Intertextuality is a key aspect of postmodern literature, highlighting the intricate connections that texts have with their literary predecessors and the historical and cultural contexts in which they exist (Tejera, 2023, p. 1). According to Julia Kristeva, intertextuality involves incorporating and transforming quotes from previous works, creating a mosaic-like composition (Kristeva, 1986, p. 37). Kristeva’s concept of relation suggests that every element is interconnected, serving as a wellspring of inspiration for new literary creations. This intertextual phenomenon results in dynamic spaces where diverse perspectives, worldviews, and trends converge, often blending elements from older works into innovative narratives. These connections may be made through direct quotations or subtle allusions, providing readers with a rich tapestry to explore (Kristeva, 1980, p. 88).

Within the broader context of intertextuality, there exists a specific category known as explicit intertextuality, which encompasses familiar instances where textual connections or references are overtly and intentionally presented within a work (Juvan, 2008, pp. 43-44; Lika, 2018, p. 16; Lombardi, 2021, p. 3). This visible and conspicuous integration of references from other texts is what defines explicit intertextuality. It serves to bring to the forefront the interconnectedness of the new creation with its literary antecedents, enriching the reader’s experience by making these connections more noticeable and apparent. According to Pecorari (2006, p. 4), explicit intertextuality can be recognized by readers through the presence of citations or quotation marks. Alternatively, it may go unnoticed if the writer does not use appropriate quotation marks or document the source texts. Obviously, explicit intertextuality is essentially a subset of the intertextual landscape, showcasing the intentionality behind weaving these textual links into the fabric of a work, thereby fostering a deeper engagement with the reader.

⁵ His name in *Her Perfect Family* is presented as ‘S’. Towards the end of the novel the reader discovers that ‘S’ is Sam.

In *Her Perfect Family*, Teresa Driscoll skilfully incorporates explicit intertextuality into her narrative. She kindly embraces literary influences and even goes to the extent of an explicit style, often presenting it in italic font, to capture the reader's attention. This meticulous approach allows Driscoll to establish intricate intertextual connections with celebrated writers, shedding light on their works and offering a deeper context and richer explanation to the chapters within her own novel. Dickinson (2016, p. 133) suggests that explicit intertextuality typically constitutes a writer's self-conscious contribution to the text. Consequently, Driscoll's use of explicit intertextuality reveals her profound understanding of her craft.

As the narrative unfolds, readers are not only encouraged but also expertly guided to discern and appreciate the symbiotic relationship between each chapter and the quoted authors and their works. Driscoll's approach to intertextuality, much like Marrapodi's (2017, p. 51) perspective, transforms the reading experience into a dynamic and interactive process. In this process, readers are like being invited to actively respond to the ongoing narrative, making connections with other texts and immersing themselves in the multi-layered storytelling. Meanwhile, in *Her Perfect Family*, the reader has the opportunity to explore the themes and characters referenced in both a cursory and in-depth manner. This flexibility allows readers to engage with the text at their own desired level of analysis and analyse deeper into the connections between Driscoll's work and the referenced texts. Whether readers choose to briefly touch upon these elements or dive into a more comprehensive exploration, the richness of the novel's intertextuality provides a platform for varying levels of engagement and interpretation.

When considering this aspect, it becomes increasingly evident that the most rewarding way to experience Driscoll's novel is within the framework of intertextual reading. This approach proves particularly beneficial when discovering the intricate connections between her work and the texts she references. Even for readers unfamiliar with the authors quoted, engaging in intertextual reading allows for a deeper understanding of the recurring themes that resonate across various texts. By doing so, readers can truly unlock the full impact of Driscoll's work, and immersing themselves in her narrative. Therefore, explicit intertextuality, as masterfully demonstrated in *Her Perfect Family*, not only shapes the reading experience but also serves as a bridge to a more comprehensive and enriched literary journey.

Our protagonist, Gemma, is a university student who frequently composes essays discussing various authors, some of whom are only mentioned by their names. These include renowned figures such as Shakespeare (Chapters 29, 49, 63), Chaucer (Chapter 63), and Virginia Woolf (Chapter 49). By integrating these renowned authors as intertexts in her narrative, Driscoll emphasizes their significance in both British and global literature. Other explicit references to English literature within *Her Perfect Family* guide the reader through different aspects and convey specific messages. For example, in chapter 12, Driscoll uses explicit intertextuality, mentioning a work without disclosing the author: "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland – *the quest for identity?*" (Driscoll, 2021, p. 109). This method enhances the reader's engagement with the text and provides a deeper appreciation of the novel's literary connections.

Driscoll acknowledges that Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, originally published in 1865, achieved global fame even before the movies, largely due to translations into approximately 170 different languages. Because of this, it is a story deeply ingrained in cultural memory on a massive global scale. The novel unfolds in a world where a child navigates life independently, far removed from societal norms. Actually, Carroll's work stands as "one of the canonical texts of Victorian children's literature" (Shi, 2016, p. 178),

portraying Alice's journey down a rabbit hole into a fantastical realm brimming with wonders and captivating creatures (Carroll, 2010). Within this whimsical environment, Alice must grapple with Wonderland's surreal laws, entirely distinct from those of the real world. As of chapter 12 in *Her Perfect Family*, Gemma is portrayed as a diligent student and a beloved daughter. Unfortunately, her innocence is shattered when we discover her infidelity, cheating on her boyfriend, Alex, with Sam. Gemma articulates her complicated emotions and remorse, likening herself to "Alice down the rabbit hole" (Driscoll, 2021, p. 115), feeling as though there's no turning back. As the novel progresses, chapter 24 reveals that Gemma is pregnant by her married school-teacher, leading her to reflect, "Feels like Alice grew up into the worst possible disaster down that stupid, stinking rabbit hole" (Driscoll, 2021, p. 179). By utilizing Carroll's concept of the 'rabbit hole' as an intertextual reference, Driscoll effectively portrays Gemma's predicament as difficult to escape, mirroring the tumultuous and unfair nature of Alice's Wonderland.

In chapters 24 and 44 of *Her Perfect Family*, Driscoll artfully employs explicit intertextuality, linking her narrative to Thomas Hardy's 1891 novel by posing a critical question, "*Is Tess in Tess of the d'Urbervilles portrayed as being responsible for her own demise?*" (Driscoll, 2021, p. 177). In the novel, Gemma is tasked with a homework assignment, explaining whether Tess in Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* is depicted as bearing responsibility for her tragic fate. Poor but beautiful Tess, in Hardy's timeless novel, is raped by Alec, becomes pregnant, and faces rejection from society and her family. Later, Tess gives birth to the baby named Sorrow who dies because it is too weak to survive. Throughout the novel, Tess reveals her past to her husband, Angel Clare, on their wedding day. This revelation shocks Angel, leading him to leave Tess. Left with no other options, Tess is compelled to marry Alec. Nevertheless, when Angel returns and confesses his love for her, Tess experiences a nervous breakdown and kills Alec. Consequently, Tess is branded a murderess and is ultimately executed (Hardy, 2005).

There is an interesting parallel between the fictional crime and execution of Tess and the real-life experience of Thomas Hardy, who witnessed the public hanging of Martha Brown, a woman accused of murdering her husband, in 1856 (Morris, 2016). This connection aligns with Kristeva's theory that writers are influenced by their personal experiences when producing their texts. Despite her flaws, Tess is not portrayed as an "idealized literary heroine" (Watts, 2007, p. 35). However, she displays honesty by revealing her past to her spouse, Angel, which leads to the breakdown of their chance at a happy marriage. In contrast to Tess's story, Gemma's parents, Rachel and Ed, in Driscoll's novel have maintained a seemingly happy marriage by concealing their real pasts from each other. Moreover, by referencing Hardy's Tess, Driscoll highlights how societal attitudes towards out-of-wedlock pregnancy have become more tolerant in the 21st century compared to the 19th century.

The next explicit intertextuality in *Her Perfect Family* is presented at the very beginning of chapter 30 as the following: "*Explore the relationship between fiction and metaphysics and/or ethics in any work by D. H. Lawrence*" (Driscoll, 2021, p. 215). As evidenced, Driscoll acknowledges the presence of metaphysical and ethical themes in the works of 20th-century English novelist D.H. Lawrence. Definitely, metaphysics refers to elements that are beyond the scope of the five senses, while ethics pertains to established moral norms guiding human behaviour and actions, including rights, responsibilities, and societal benefits. Driscoll's exploration of metaphysics leads to complex questions that are not easily resolved. Bell (1992, p. 51) implies that D.H. Lawrence's *The Rainbow* provides a comprehensive expression of metaphysical impersonal feeling. In this novel, Lawrence, considered one of the greatest English writers of the modern era (Davies, 2013), expertly portrays the darker aspects of male-female relationships and the transformations from love

to hatred. His protagonist, Ursula Brangwen, rejects traditional ethics, leading to her alienation from her parents and society. She engages in a temporary lesbian relationship with her schoolteacher, Winifred. Additionally, Ursula becomes pregnant with Anton out of wedlock, an act considered immoral during that time. This highlights the intertextual themes of student-teacher relationships and extramarital pregnancy between *The Rainbow* and *Her Perfect Family*.

In chapter 30 of Driscoll's novel, it is revealed that Gemma becomes pregnant after having a relationship with her married school teacher, Sam Blake. As noticed, Driscoll presents a dual ethical critique. First, there is criticism directed at engaging in a romantic and sexual relationship with a married individual. Second, the relationship between a student and teacher is condemned, as it is deemed unacceptable within educational institutions and in social life. Moreover, Sam lies to Gemma, deceiving her by claiming that his wife is old and ugly and that he plans to divorce her. Here, Driscoll aims to convey to readers the importance of ethical values in interpersonal relationships, emphasizing moral principles and values in both individual lives and society as a whole.

In chapter 36 of *Her Perfect Family*, Driscoll begins with a thought-provoking question. She explicitly incorporates intertextuality by referencing Charles Dickens' 1859 novel *A Tale of Two Cities* and its recurring theme of revenge. It becomes evident that this chapter is centred on the theme of revenge, which she introduces as a comparative subject for readers to ponder: "*Revenge is not forced upon a person but is a choice. Discuss in relation to A Tale of Two Cities by Charles Dickens*" (Driscoll, 2021, p. 270). Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* tells the story of London and Paris during the French Revolution,⁶ challenging the very idea of history (Davis, 2007, p. 357). One of the iconic characters in the novel is Madame Defarge, whose sole purpose is to seek revenge on the aristocrats who ruined her family (Dickens, 2004). Throughout Dickens' novel, Madame Defarge continually devises plans to exact her brutal vengeance, making it a deeply personal mission. In Driscoll's novel, Gemma's desire for revenge stems from jealousy when she discovers that her married lover, Sam, has no intention of divorcing his wife. Feeling deceived, Gemma decides to report Sam to the university where he works and publicly shame him on social media for engaging in a romantic and sexual relationship with his much younger student (Driscoll, 2021, pp. 270-271). To address Driscoll's question posed at the beginning of chapter 36, it is evident that the feeling of revenge in both novels is a result of personal choices made by the female characters.

During the introduction of chapter 39, Driscoll prompts the reader to consider how Mary Shelley's tumultuous family life is mirrored in her literary works: "*Discuss how Mary Shelley's troubled family life is evident in her writing*" (Driscoll, 2021, p. 263). Although this chapter is relatively short, Gemma contemplates how she will disclose the subject of her pregnancy from a married man with her parents, anticipates their reactions, and considers how she will care for her baby after its birth. Deliberately, Driscoll arouses the reader's curiosity about Shelley's⁷ life by reminding us of her troubled family history. Notably, Shelley is the daughter of the "proto-feminist writer" (Clemit, 2003, p. 26) Mary Wollstonecraft, who tragically died soon after giving birth to her due to "puerperal fever" (Hoeveler, 2003, p. 46). Shelley herself endured numerous losses, including the deaths of

⁶ As Hawes (2007: p. 3) reports, Dickens is the most important literary English author, beside Shakespeare.

⁷ Mary Shelley's father was the writer William Godwin, who remarried two years after Mary Wollstonecraft's death. As a result, Shelley grew up with her step-siblings. Godwin strongly disapproved of his daughter's love affair and pregnancy with the married Percy Shelley, who was one of the prominent poets of the English Romantic period.

her three children and her husband Percy Shelley (Mellor, 2003, p. 16). She also grappled with self-blame for her mother's death and her inability to provide Percy with a child (Hoeveler, 2003, p. 46).

Repetitively, *Her Perfect Family's* chapter 52 exhibits explicit intertextuality concerning parental responsibility, drawing from Shelley's *Frankenstein*. The reader is directed to "Discuss the theme of parental responsibility and neglect in relation to the novel *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley" by Driscoll (2021, p. 341). Actually, Shelley's novel presents the fear of scientific innovation (Vaishnav, 2021) and is considered as "one of the most powerful horror stories of Western civilization" (Mellor, 2003, p. 9), originally published in 1818. As both *Frankenstein* novel (Shelley, 2003) and *Her Perfect Family* reveal, families are profoundly interconnected, and children are both cherished and supported by their parents.

In chapters 45 and 49, Driscoll diverts the reader's attention to explore the theme of isolation in Charlotte Brontë's 1847 classic novel, *Jane Eyre*, which holds a significant place in women's literature and the broader context of the 19th century (Brennan, 2010, p. 113). The question posed by the novelist is: "Discuss the theme of isolation as portrayed in *Jane Eyre*" (Driscoll, 2021, pp. 299, 319). Interestingly, while the theme of isolation is not explicitly evident throughout Driscoll's entire novel, it is merely presented as an essay homework written by Gemma. Despite this, there are several parallel intertextualities between *Jane Eyre* and *Her Perfect Family*. In both novels, the main characters, Jane (Brontë, 2006) and Gemma, find themselves falling in love with married men who are significantly older than them, and these men often attribute their wives' supposed madness or psychological problems. Additionally, another similarity between Jane and Gemma is their shared passion for reading books, which has been nurtured since their childhood. Besides, a notable parallel between Brontë's and Driscoll's novels is the use of first-person narrative technique, where the main characters describe events from their own perspectives. This narrative style allows the reader immediate access to the characters' views and emotions, enabling a deeper engagement with their experiences. The similarities imply a connection between the characters and the storytelling techniques used in *Jane Eyre* and *Her Perfect Family*, thereby strengthening the intertextual relationship between the two novels.

In chapters 49, 53, and 57 of *Her Perfect Family*, Driscoll draws attention to *The Mill on the Floss*, a novel by George Eliot published in 1860. It is noted that *The Mill on the Floss* is considered the "most closely autobiographical of George Eliot's works" (Rignall, 2000, p. 262). Significantly, Driscoll purposely does not specify the author of Eliot's novel, creating an opportunity for the reader to search for the author's identity and discover that it is a woman named Mary Ann Evans, who wrote under the pen name George Eliot. This deliberate omission prompts the reader to question the reasons behind a female author writing under a male pseudonym and invites exploration into the social context of 19th-century England.

Additionally, Driscoll provides further information about *The Mill on the Floss* within her own novel. It is revealed that the novel is Gemma's favourite book (Driscoll, 2021, p. 344) and that it serves as a reference point for discussions on Maggie Tulliver and the novel's tragic ending (Driscoll, 2021, p. 393). When one reads *The Mill on the Floss*, it becomes evident that Maggie Tulliver is the main character who elicits sympathy and relies on others for affection. The reader follows Maggie's journey from childhood to young adulthood (Eliot, 2003). In the early chapters of Driscoll's novel, Gemma, like Maggie Tulliver, exhibits sensitivity and a strong need for love, indicating that the author was influenced to some extent by Eliot's main character. This explicit intertextuality between Gemma and Maggie

Tulliver suggests a connection and possible inspiration from Eliot's novel in shaping Driscoll's portrayal of Gemma.

Conclusion

The explicit intertextual relations present in the postmodern 2021 novel *Her Perfect Family* showcase Driscoll's clever utilization of various English authors to construct the plot and shape the characters in her novel. This interplay between different literary works not only adds layers of meaning to the narrative but also invites readers to make comparisons and draws them into a world filled with a sense of familiarity or curiosity. Obviously, Driscoll masterfully displays the writers and their works that have undoubtedly influenced her own life. This is a testament to Julia Kristeva's intertextuality theory, which posits that any new work cannot be created without the influence of previous works. Driscoll's explicit intertextuality is a clear depiction of this theory, as she weaves together a tapestry of literary references, providing rich context for readers and creating a historical journey through English literature.

Furthermore, intertextuality aligns with a reader-centred approach to literary criticism, as it acknowledges that the meaning of a new text can be fundamentally shaped by the reader's own background knowledge and experiences. Thus, intertextual reading promotes critical thinking by fostering readers' analysis and interpretation of a text in conjunction with other texts. By encouraging this approach, readers are prompted to explore the connections, comparisons, and interplay between different literary works, thereby stimulating their critical thinking abilities. As I engaged in an intertextual reading of *Her Perfect Family*, I discovered that I could better comprehend certain chapters, thanks to my familiarity with the explicit references Driscoll made. However, it is important to note that the full impact of the explicit intertextual references may not be realized if the reader is unfamiliar with the quoted authors. Thus, by incorporating different authors and works as intertexts in her novel, Driscoll effectively directs readers to engage in further research, promoting a more comprehensive understanding of the intricate plot. Consequently, readers are able to identify the similarities between the related texts through reading and conducting their own investigations.

Ultimately, the explicit intertextuality employed by Driscoll in *Her Perfect Family* serves as a complementary feature that enhances character development and theme description for readers. It adds richness and depth to the narrative, creating a multi-layered reading experience that bridges connections between multiple literary works.

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