

## **Empathic I. B. Singer: Strategies of Narrative Empathy in The Bus**

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### **Abstract**

Empathy means an ability to put oneself in other's position, condition and situation to feel others' imagination and sensation. Result from that, Suzanne Keen has put forward the concept of strategic narrative empathy holding novel reading could form an altruistic and peaceable citizenry sometimes, but not routine. Meanwhile, Matthew Ratcliffe opposed Keen's emphasis on individuals, he doesn't invite empathy with an individual character but with the situation, which means to combine the phenomenology and the empathy to focus on the experience of world. Martha Nussbaum adds cultivation of moral imagination and civic impact through reading into empathy theory, just like Singer's intention to cure the Jewish holocaust hangover for bounded audience, trigger the ethical resonance for ambassadorial audience and motivate the sympathy with human nature for broadcast audience. Singer has written for the world and his work *The Bus* not only has unique individual but also special situation and moral enlightenment. This paper tries to explore bounded, ambassadorial, and broadcast strategic narrative empathy in *The Bus* finding that the first one has showed compassion and solicitude for compatriots, the second one shares the similarity of gender, shortening the distance of female all around and the third one connects human beings to a community of common destiny, which has laid an ethical foundation for helping each other in crisis and altruistic actions.

*Keywords:* empathy, *The Bus*, strategic narrative empathy

### **Introduction**

The definition of empathy is defined by Nussbaum as "the ability to see the world from another's viewpoint." (Martha Nussbaum 2012: 36) It implies unconscious projection of us into something or somebody. It is "the act of identifying ourselves with an object and participating in its physical and emotional sensations even to the point of making our own physical responses." (William Harmon 2012: 178) So we can define empathy as a kind of lightening combining exterior sensations and inner imaginative penetration maybe through actions or kinesthetic performance.

Suzanne Keen suggests there are three kinds of author's strategic empathizing. She tries to make the understanding among idealized authorial readers and actual, historical Readers. Thus Keen suggests that authorial strategic empathizing can be discerned by studying techniques of bounded, ambassadorial, and broadcast narrative empathy in fictions. (Keen 2008: 477)

As one of the most prominent Jewish writers in modern America, Issac Bashevis Singer (1904-1991) was named as the master of short stories in the 20th century for his unique and insightful narrative vision. He has the power to "destroy all spiritual principles and dump an entire age into a cynical materialism emptied of meaning." (Tyler Wasson 2003: 982) His short story *The Bus* by focusing on interlaced passengers of different races, regions on

a bus, presented to the readers a trip about race, ethics and interpersonal connection. People had to endure indifference and violence and their memory carried scars and pain, which could trigger a meditation and resonance of wound healing to all mankind. This means that describe each character's misfortune is not just about the national emotional cure, it can also produce more cross-cultural emotional resonance. As Keen's strategic narrative empathy theory had deepened the level of readers' narrative perception at different levels, and taken people to perceive the painful process that people have experienced from exposing trauma to healing wounds and then to confusion along with the movement of the bus.

After studying the text of *The Bus* and the theory of empathy, this paper finds out that the different forms of connection in *The Bus* has just represent the three kinds of strategic narrative empathy, they are: the political persecution and physical body tearing under racial connection embody bounded strategic narrative empathy; the mother-child relationship and the relationship between men and women under ethical connection embody ambassadorial strategic narrative empathy; the distortion and helplessness of humanity under the interpersonal connection embody the broadcast strategic empathy.

### **Ethnic Connection: Bounded Strategic Narrative Empathy on Trauma Therapy**

The novel has presented us the story of the Jewish writer's crazy trip from Geneva through Spain in 1956. For the regulation of changing seats on the bus, "I" got to know Celina Weyerhofer, who is refugee from a concentration camp before she married a Swiss banker. Then "I" was invited by a 14-year-old boy Mark to sit beside his mother Annette Metalon who was rich because of her marriage with an old business man. The story was unfolded in the limited perspective of the first person narration along with stories about two families: Mrs. Weyerhofer and Mrs. Metalon's. It was such a short story that it reminded readers of the Jewish issues. "Occasionally, a text so resonates with its readers and their knowledge of the author's intentions that it has the power to draw the world's attention to an issue or problem." (Keen 2007: 140) For Singer, his living background always drove him to write for the suffering people unconsciously. The holocaust was an unavoidable event for the world. We can not imagine the dark time for Mrs. Weyerhofer to strive for surviving, nor can we feel the untraceable psychological trauma behind the brutal death. Such powers of empathic projection can not be achieved by documents, but through literary narration. Authors have the magic power to engage the readers in the targeted issue.

How does empathy happen? Audience may feel sorry for the two families' miserable life and also may try to put themselves in their background to experience the pain and tear. Such emotion is not just the feeling of sorry or sympathy for someone, it may come to a different angle to connect with others to touch the bottom of humanity. Thus, a deeper emotional experience is rising, that is empathizing. Nancy Eisenberg has ever precisely made a difference between empathy and sympathy: "Empathy is an affective response that stems from the apprehension or comprehension of another's emotional state of condition, and which is similar to what the other person is feeling or would be expected to feel." Sympathy is similar to empathy, but it refers to "an emotional response stemming from the apprehension of another's emotional response stemming from the apprehension of another's emotional state or condition that is not the same as the other's state or condition, but consists of feelings of sorrow or concern for the other." (Nancy Eisenberg 2007: 72)

Bounded strategic empathy addresses an in-group, relies on experiences of mutuality, and stimulates readers' feeling with familiar others. (Keen 2008: 481) It has spectacular circle which prevent others from joining in. As we know, language is the initial barrier that blocked out outside readers. Singer has created *The Bus* for his own national people because he used their unique language Yiddish, which has fully reflected the purpose of this work is to write the history of his nation, to heal the wounds of his people, and to enhance national

consciousness and self-confidence. To be sure, Singer's work has attracted more and more readers outside his own nation and even the world to empathize, because of his skilful narrative skills and nuanced characterization.

We are easily prone to believe that the characteristic text of race, class, gender and religion will restrict the readership to one group and exclude the other groups. When Mrs. Weyerhofer first appeared, she wore a conspicuous black cross on her breast, which left us an impression of a devout Christian. However, as the dialogue went on, the narrator found that their accent was similar and they all interjected some Yiddish words. Suddenly, the narrator found out the true identity of the woman, which had inspired the continuous unobstructed communication. After knowing each other, we realized that she is such a strong woman after surviving from the holocaust. For Jewish, an inner racial group; this was an uncover scar conversation; this was a period of wounded history that can never be indelible; this would stimulate their strong racial emotion, and the degree of emotional heat could never be measured by the people outside the group.

We are also easily prone to believe that characters that have same experience can be bounded in emotion naturally. Because we may ask the same questions when the character is sharing his/her bounded strategic empathy designed by the author. For Singer, he will not take a great length to show us the Jewish victims' situation and condition. He only picked up the individual to show his/her dismal experience. Given an individual victim and a lot of victims, which one is more likely to resonate with the reader? Mary-Catherine Harrison had given us the answer, suggesting individual victims prompt a different response than a lot of victims. Numerous empirical research has identified a large quantity of people have a remarkably weak impact on emotions and ethical behaviors. That is because it is hard for us to imagine ourselves in a large quantity of people's place to feel their emotion, to imagine the subjective experience of individuals and an undifferentiated whole. Thus, "narratives about individuals can help overcome readers' indifference to qualified or generalized accounts of human suffering." (Mary-Catherine Harrison 2014: 137-138) Comparing to the groups who may represent the powerful national or racial events, it is easy to coin emotional response to personal disproportional suffering experiences. Though novels focusing on whole social events can navigate the reader to wholly understand the landscape of the international situation analysis, they are not easily to coin a moved and pitiful environment for audience to empathize with characters who is unique and stereoscopic. Generally speaking, the empathy to individuals in the novel can help to duplicate the perceptual power of personal cases.

Indeed, Singer did not color too much about the degree of trauma or the recovery of wounded general Jews after the holocaust, but chose several representative characters to make the reader come closely to the personal feelings of characters under the impact of troubled times. "Additional expansions of the identities of 'normal, law-abiding' individuals to include their laziness, selfness, greed, lust, and even murderous wishes and impulse are probably necessary if we to solve our greatest social problems." (Bracher Mark 2009: 54) Singer picked two women of obvious personality as main characters to unfold the story of two families; they are Mrs. Weyerhofer and Mrs. Melaton. It is not hard to see that the two women's initials are just the opposite, "M" and "W", just as their attitude to life contains a large number of antagonistic factors. Mrs. Weyerhofer complained that her husband did not give her enough money while Mrs. Melaton was very rich and never worry about the economic problem. Mrs. Weyerhofer was always ready to give his husband a divorce while Mrs. Melaton held that her husband was very careful, he always thought long term, and they had a very happy life. Mrs. Weyerhofer liked to express her dissatisfaction with life while Mrs. Melaton chose to accept her son's oppression with tolerance. They are the two sides

of Jewish women and every one of them is of fresh and blood to catch the perception of bounded audience.

For Singer, his belief in God is fragile, especially after holocaust. That is due to the God would allow the destruction of European Jewry without any mediation. He believed no matter how hard the Jews struggle or forge ahead, ultimately there is no hope. (Qiao Guoqiang 2006: 53) He had practiced to “raise Jewishness to a symbolic quality, and is no longer writing specifically about Jews but about man in relationship to God.” (Tyler Wasson 2003: 982) Thus, his outstanding contribution in the field of cognition has made him a qualified writer in the same vein as Jorge Luis Borges and Franz Kafka.

Through the connection between Jews and Jews, including dialogue and human interaction, the trauma maybe is on the way of healing in some degree. E. M. Foster had ever called human to connect with each other to solve problems and to be strong in the face of difficulties. The characters in *The Bus* had released their pain and stress through communicating and complaining with companions, at the same time, the author had relieved psychological depression, saved the self and alleviated underground psychology complex through narrating, which means to treat the self-trauma and reconstruct the significance of life. The above may be of true meaning for Jews while for the others, they can also find their own empathic perspective in this novel.

### **Ethical Connection: Ambassadorial Strategic Narrative Empathy on Men and Women**

The author’s sharing feelings or purposed empathy may not always be correct or the targeted readers may not always be the ideal audience projected by the narration. Certainly, some empathy can be evoked unintentionally by the author so that neither the audience nor the author can directly confute that inaccurate empathy. Result from that, authors would like to invite other audience to judge the true meaning from works so as to enlarge the influence and bridge a gap between the in-group readers and outside readers. Authors sometimes write for more than one audience, and they may try to appeal another group of audience. Then, ambassadorial strategic empathy is starting to work, which intends to direct the emotional transaction for particular audiences. The concept of ambassadorial strategic empathy defines in this way: “ambassadorial strategic empathy addresses chosen others with the aim of cultivating their empathy for the in-group, often to a specific end.” (Keen 2008: 483)

Ambassadorial strategic empathy addresses distant others with the aim of overcoming both similarity and here-and-now bias, calling forth the empathy of targeted others for needy strangers, or for the disenfranchised, despised, or the misunderstood among us, often with a specific end in mind. (Keen 2011: 370) The term origins from the word “embassy” who intends to hold an important position on behalf of others, appealing for justice, fairness, assistance and common sense. If we hold bounded strategic empathy attempts to win the attention of inside audience, then, ambassadorial strategic empathy attempts to win the attention of outside, but not to the whole world. If we hold bounded empathy rely on their certain routines, customs and other conventions shared by the in-group, then, ambassadorial strategic empathy tries to make judgment as it renders the situation to strangers.

In the two married life on the bus, if we say the connection of wife and husband embodies the healing of national trauma, which belongs to bounded strategic empathy, then, the conflict between them has manifested the ambassadorial strategic empathy. As we know, marriage is not always stands for love, sometimes it is the embodiment of exchange of interests. “Even the novel’s most dramatic evocation of family and transcendent morality frames kinship and moral certainty within a contractual pattern of offer and counter-offer.” (Gregg D Crane 2002: 201) Mrs. Weyerhofer complained his husband had a million prejudices of Jews so their marriage was founded upon her conversion to Christianity. The other Jew woman Mrs. Metalon had married a rich businessman who is 40 years older than

her. He exchanged his money for his wife's youth. Both of the two families had indicated the kinship was a kind of bargain in the marriage market consisting of concession and sacrifice, supply and obtain. The simple description of the two women's situation, their loneliness, sadness, inanition appealed to the men of male chauvinism standing high above their women an empathetic response. It indicated Singer steers the readers towards with Jewish women. Maybe the sheltered young girls or boys with relatively little experience of married life and no first-hand familiarity with feminism can recognize and empathize with the feelings of women's compromise. This is the truth of society lasting a long time so that some readers can find the similar transaction around them. Certainly, it is not the patent for Jews; it is for certain audience during their helpless situation.

We noticed that at the beginning of the novel, Mrs. Weyerhofer's face had been described in detail. "Her hair was dyed red, her face was thickly rouged, the lids of her brown eyes were smeared with blue eyeshadow, and from beneath all this dye and paint emerged deep wrinkles. She had a hooked nose lips red as a cinder, and yellowish teeth." (Singer 1982: 542) She tries to make herself look more appropriate, as if in order to make herself more confident and seem more worthy of respect. "The body is personable; it is the mark of power." (Pierre Bourdieu 1984: 467) However, the scars hidden under the gorgeous appearance, makes the reader feel the devastation of World War II to people. It is not just injuries that a Jewish woman suffered, but more people were suffering from the sharing scars.

Certainly, Mrs. Weyerhofer is not willing to be such a silent woman as Mrs. Metalon. When she referred to her husband, her narration is in extremely complaining and hateful tone. As for the couple's descriptions of each other are difficult to reach an agreement, it is hard for readers under the unreliable narration of the first-person limited perspective to find out the truth. For example, she complained that her husband is always very stingy on her daily expenses, but she was late because of shopping in front of all passengers. Regardless of the truth, she seems to be complaining the male suppression and longing for more freedom.

In contemporary visual culture, women are always towards, which is becoming the social requirement for women. Such standard forces women constantly to transform their bodies, or cover the parts which are not perfect, which is actually the socially widespread cultural privileges of men to women. Consequently, women had to retreat, be patient or run away, it seems that they can do few and far between. For example, Mrs. Metalon, since her husband died, his son Mark had taken the voice in the family of patriarchy, he forced his mother to date with "I", and he even forced "I" to take a bath in the his mother's room. Apparently, his idealism after the death of his father got improved, making him more rightfully implement plan according to his own will. Some woman writer (here it is referred to the famous woman writer María de Zayas, whose famous work is *Disenchantment of Love* in 1997) sought to "denounce the misogynistic cultural ideology of her time-rooted in the lack of compassion—that sees women as incapable and inferior." (Isabel Jaén 2014: 191) As we know, woman in the early 20th century did not have the access to education and they were under the male's disrespect and ignorance. They could not share their pain, nor got any help or remedy from the lofty gentleman.

Arguably, today's 21st readers were not the readers Singer had in mind as he developed the character of Mrs. Weyerhofer and Mrs. Metalon who had to rely on their husbands' economic support to live in their own community. The purpose of shaping the two women, probably as representatives, was to unmask the real situation of Jewish woman, in order to arouse the reader's sympathy and in the end to improve the situation. But in the face of contemporary readers, they may feel indignation and self pity, they may ask why the women are so lament that why did those women choose to stoop to men on their knees to ensure

their economic satisfaction, then, women readers today will be always ready to inspire their female independent consciousness, get rid of the male hegemony and bondage, and go for personal freedom. “Ambassadorial strategic empathy is time sensitive, context and issue dependant.” (Keen 2008: 486) Singer came from the Jewish gathering place Poland and he wrote with Yiddish for Jewish exile. If we consider time and distance, as well as gaps in experience, it might weaken the potential for narrative empathizing out of the author’s own time to evoke an appropriate reflection. However, it is meaningful to find out some of the Jewish women living today have felt the same evocative power of female right of Singer’s ambassadorial strategic empathy.

“When those readers articulate their differences with a text’s and author’s apparent claims, they may call upon their empathic response as a sort of witness to an alternative perspective.” (Keen 2007: 140) We know Singer not only wrote for Jews, it is easily for readers of different races and cultures to find some recognition except Jewish history and culture. There could be arguments over empathic differences among readers and those different emotional reactions are revolving around the shared novel, giving that novel a heat status it hasn’t arrived before in literature analysis.

### **Intrapersonal Connection: Broadcast Strategic Narrative Empathy on Cross-culture**

Broadcast strategic narrative empathy has no limitation to its appeal. “Broadcast strategic empathy, so named because its appeal is scattered widely like seeds thrown across a field, calls upon every reader to experience emotional fusion with the target, by emphasizing our common human experiences, feelings, hopes, and vulnerabilities. Narrative empathy in the form of an author’s broadcast strategic empathizing employs universals to reach everyone, including distant others and later readers. It transmits the particularities that connect a far away subject to a feeling reader of virtually any description.” (Keen 2008: 488) As it attempts to overcome any biases and barriers of distance, region, time and culture, it may lead the readers to different kinds of perspectives. A fixed perspective owns a single figure or a small unit’s reflection. On the contrary, “multiple perspectives can be employed either in formal alternation (with different sections employing different centers of consciousness) or within the same scene, when more than one character’s reflections on the action are offered. (Keen 2003: 45)

When it comes to broadcast strategic narrative empathy, language is a universal tool to arrive at distant others and transmit the special feelings connecting a far away subject to a feeling reader. Based on that, authors should pay attention to the language they choose for the target readers. “On the one hand, he (Singer) maintained that all translations of his works be based on the English versions, yet the Yiddish versions of his fiction are often quite different from the English ones.” (Shaffer 2011: 825) Through the acceptable language, readers can easily find the character identification involving the human commons of representative experiences, social circumstance and psychological disposition. The Bus had not known by the broadcast readers until it was translated by Joseph Singer. The general audience can not understand such an obscure language like Yiddish, let alone to empathize with unfamiliar words. The writer’s choice of language determines his ideal reader. Thanks to the translation which has built the bridge between bounded strategic empathy and broadcast empathy. Except for the language, as if one fiction has adopted by the world readers, across gender, class, union and race, it must have its own techniques to provide the chances that readers can travel together with the characters in the novel and touch the same emotion according to the situation the novel has created. The Bus has no exception. Singer had designed the general family life where almost everyone of us are belong to so as to expand the visualizing mental imagery and made every audience feel warm and familiar to participate in the activity in the novel. For example, there is violence in marriage life

between Mr. Weyerhofer and Mrs. Weyerhofer, Oedipus complex between Mark and his mother, facial makeup after trauma in Mrs. Weyerhofer and worldwide exile after holocaust. During this trip, readers become familiar with the distinct and fresh characters, experience the different career and living environment. As a reader, you might not be empathic for one character, but you can for another.

There are two mainstream in cross-cultural empathy in *The Bus*, one is desire, the other is escape.

As for the desire, we have to mention a sexual fantasy between “I” and Mrs. Metalon. Although they had to awkwardly stay together under Mark’s intentionally arrangement, they had fantasies about each other when the emotions were slightly prevailing rationality. Empathic kinesthetic imagery has taken an important part in the narrator’s brain. He has captured a feeling of projecting himself into the love affair, a deeper feature of empathic response. This instant of indulge brought readers’ natural feelings, but along with it, the recognition that people can inevitable imprisoned by carnal desire. In addition, readers may ask questions about whether they were allowed to have such relationship, is it forbidden according to secular ethic? Maybe such description aims to tell his readers an empathic response could lead to the ethical reflection.

In the closed bus, whether Jews or gentiles, everyone was eager to escape. In one family on the bus, Mrs. Weyerhofer wanted to get away from the anger and blame from others on the bus. In addition, she had to get away from the bondage of marriage, especially the violent and stint husband. While his husband Mr. Weyerhofer also wanted to get out of the shaming marriage. In another family, Mark wanted to get away from British to begin a new life in America where he believed can realize his dreams as soon as possible, instead of returning to his mother living in Turkey. While his mother also tried to escape from his son to have a free daily life and decide which man to date with again. Besides, “I” hoped to escape from the entanglement and control of Mrs. Metalon and her son Mark who had brought me trouble and struggle. From the Jewish history, this has repeatedly such issues like destroying, becoming refugees, migrating from one nation to another has repeatedly happened. It is very interesting at the end of the novel, although I had fled the bus by some inner powers, “I” still went back to the scene where just like “I” got on the bus at first and “I” met Mrs. Weyerhofer. This is to confirm Singer’s view of meaninglessly escape and his attitude toward pessimism. It is indicated that “escapism may be accomplishing some of the work typically attributed to perspective-taking exercised across barriers of difference.” (Keen 2014: 25) The perception of fugitive consciousness is interlinked. So this is not only the plight of the Jewish people, but also the plight of many countries and regions. As the last sentence of the novel says, “the forces that drive us mad have all the time in the world.” (Singer 1982: 563) That is why a problem of a nation can be a problem of the world. Thus, readers couldn’t help but attracted to the described mysterious force, willing to follow the author’s ideas to go through this journey together. Obviously, this kind of mysterious force is not unique to the Jews, or peculiar to a bus, but always with us, forming the ubiquitous power.

“Readers’ testimony strongly suggests that they often feel for characters, feel involved in turns of events, even when they are aware of the illusory quality of fictional worlds.” (Keen 2011: 309) Audience may not believe that in one trip of *The Bus* they will meet so many strange experiences, or they can recognize the illusory images as soon as they begin to read. That means empathy may not always be produced as the writer have imaged, it may go to the other side. “Empathy is fickle emotion. It is triggered by cuteness, good looks, kinship, friendship and solidarity. And it is easily shut off or converted to its opposite, schadenfreude, by competition or revenge.” (Steven Pinker 2011: 310) As we are living in a changing world, our awareness goes by what we see and we feel. Literature cannot

enhance our body or bring us self-improvement at once, but it creates a warm house for lightening and Renaissance to born and it drives us to new moral values and social orders. Though it is always imperfect, its tensions are extremely useful to push us to pay attention to the very components, reasons, and impact of empathy, not only about problematic others but also ourselves in our social conditions.

### Conclusion

As an old fashioned writer, Singer never followed the steps of his contemporaries. “He regarded literature as an entertainment for the reader, a delightful puzzle for the writer, as both attempt to come together to understand an infinitely variable humanity in an inscrutable universe.” (George Perkins & Barbara Perkins 2007: 2216) Singer is a cross-culture, cross-regional writer, because he wrote for his nation, which is a necessary part of the world. His contents covered the most delicate parts of human nature, the softest parts, and the most helpless parts. He intended to produce a theoretical definition of worldview that supposed to include everyone’s freedom and radical proportion of humanity, although it is hard to accomplish, at least empathy ought to be wildly spread.

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