

# Kristevan Affect in Connie Willis' *Passage*

**Fazel Asadi Amjad & Behnaz Heydari Jaghargh**

Department of English Language and Literature, Kharazmi University  
South Mofatteh Ave, Tehran, Iran

Email: asadi@khu.ac.ir; behnaz.heydari@khu.ac.ir

**Abstract** Studying affect in works of fiction can shed light on aspects which may remain hidden otherwise. Julia Kristeva is one theorist demonstrating the semiotic in language through scrutinizing affect in literary texts. This paper is an attempt to explore the semiotic dimensions of affect in Connie Willis's neglected novel, *Passage*. This novel is categorized under the NDE genre, which is the genre of literature concerned with near-death experiences. In this novel, disastrous and traumatic events, related to the experience of death by various characters, especially the protagonist, Joanna Lander, produce fearful moments. These can be captured through the type of genre of the text, silences and pauses, different sorts of deprivation in characters, and the features of poetic language in the text itself. In such situations, the readers' identification with the characters contributes to the affective aspect of the text. A close reading of the semiotic aspect of this novel, utilizing the theories of Kristeva, demonstrates how characters' death drive can put them in disastrous situations, contrary to those with jouissance. It also depicts how traumatic events can become more tolerable in human beings' social life by the help of identification, reconciliation, social collectiveness, camaraderie, and emotional bond between characters, despite the casualties.

**Keywords** Connie Willis; *Passage*; Julia Kristeva; Affect; Semiotic Drive

**Authors** **Fazel Asadi Amjad** is Professor in English literature at Kharazmi University. He is interested in philosophy and mysticism. **Behnaz Heydari Jaghargh** is currently a PhD student in Kharazmi University of Tehran. Majored in English language and literature, her oeuvre embraces various aspects of contemporary American novels, semiotics, and cultural studies.

## **Introduction: Close to Death**

Connie Willis has won numerous awards for her sci-fi and fantasy novels. Winning several Hugo Awards and Nebula Awards, she is one of the most prominent figures

in the literary scene of America today. Among her salient works, *Passage* (2001) stands as the 2001 Colorado Book Award Winner for Science Fiction and the 2002 Locus Award Winner for Best Science Fiction Novel. Here, Willis directly attends to the nature of near-death experience in the scientific fashion of sci-fi genre. Besides the complex mosaic of intertextual references, the story of the Titanic and the movie adapted from it, constitute the main structure of the novel.

Joanna Lander, as the main character of the novel, is a psychologist who interviews the hospital patients who have undergone near-death experience. Meanwhile, Dr. Richard Wright asks for her collaboration in his scientific experiments in the same area. Getting involved in Richard's project demands her own volunteering to go under the test, due to a chain of events. There she experiences artificial death in the laboratory, by metaphorically finding herself on the Titanic on the night it drowned. This and other evidences lead her to believe near-death experience is the last SOS message the brain sends in the most desperate moment of losing one's life. Her real death in the hospital, resulted from a knife stab attack, gives the readers the opportunity to witness what Joanna experiences through real death this time.

Several pages of this novel are devoted to describing Joanna's death and corpse, among others. Moreover, the whole novel is about NDE, which is short for near-death experience. Through discussing the experience of death itself, Willis involves the readers with the fearful moments of death and the anxious moments of possible revival. This study is a close reading of *Passage* in an attempt to explore the semiotic dimension of language. By going beyond the surface of words, we analyze the affects and drives in the midst of silences, literary devices, and traumatic events. This is while we demonstrate the possible effects of identification and social collectiveness in the times of difficulties in a novel which has not been under a critical study yet.

### **Affect in the World of Novels**

Connie Willis is a widely admired contemporary author. That is partly because she develops characters "with which many of us will readily, if sardonically, be able to identify" (Wolfe 313). Besides the outstanding characters, metaphors play an important role in her works. Duckwitz, for instance, refers to the "literary complexity" and merit of Willis' "Schwarzschild Radius", due to its metaphors, despite other sci-fi stories (1). Metaphors are also a prominent aspect of *Passage*.

Connie Willis' works are mostly written in the sci-fi genre, based on logic and scientific estimations. Time travel, as a science fiction motif, is the subject of

her "Oxford time travel duology, *Blackout* and *All Clear*" (Carpenter and Halpern 91). The significant point in this duology is that the "self-consistency of time travel prevents the past from being changed" (Carpenter and Halpern 91). This logical characteristic is also prevalent in *Passage*, where instead of metaphysics or supernatural elements, brain's function is described in relation to the near-death experience.

Connie Willis' science fiction sometimes goes against the grain. Most sci-fi novels are associated with scientific complicated terminology and context. This is while in Willis' works, "there is a stubborn insistence on the ordinary, the commonplace: the domestic, or what is often called trivial" (Kelso 67). This accessible nature can be recognized in her Civil War science fiction *Lincoln's Dreams* and *Passage*, among her other works, despite the complexity the subjects demand.

The novel, *Passage*, itself is referred to by Badley in her study of virtual afterlife thrillers. Seeing the work as primarily about the protagonist's "denial of death", she asserts that the narration of this work shows "a ghost story in reverse in which the subject is haunted by images that signal her will to go on living" (1). She suggests conceptualizing death and the life after in the form of a movie in this novel represents "cinema's awareness of its own uncanniness" (2). This NDE narrative has opted for *Titanic* (Cameron) as one of the possible frameworks of afterlife. The disaster itself provides a great opportunity for the study of affect in this novel.

Julia Kristeva is not the first theorist to mention the word, affect. Sigmund Freud has been the most prominent figure utilizing the term in psychoanalysis, while the word has been around in the realm of literary criticism, especially reader-response theory, as well. However, for Kristeva, who connects psychoanalysis and literary criticism in a sense, affect is necessary "as the precondition of any linguistic event", since its "dialectical interaction determines the nature of the event" (Kluchin 61). It is because the linguistic event involves a reader. In the process of analysis, "we must pay attention to the affective bond between the reader and text, to its strength, its quality, its tenor" (Kluchin 61). This affective bond resides in Kristeva's semiotic aspect of language.

In order to further elaborate on affect in its Kristevan sense, it is necessary to differentiate between the two aspects of language, the symbolic and the semiotic, discussed in Kristeva's works. According to Judith Butler, "Kristeva attempts to expose the limits of Lacan's theory of language by revealing the semiotic dimension of language that it excludes" (104). Moreover, Kristeva's notion of the symbolic function of language is rather different from Lacan's Symbolic, although she

sporadically refers to the latter, as well. In fact, “more sophisticated than” that of Lacan, Kristeva’s “symbolic function—the ability to take a position or make a judgment—is just one aspect of signification”, along with the semiotic function (Oliver, *Reading Kristeva: Unraveling the Double-Bind* 39). The process of signification is comprised of both the symbolic and the semiotic aspects of language. While both are present in any form of language, they constitute two contradictory and at the same time complementary sides in the process of signification. While the symbolic is concerned with “phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics”, the semiotic relates to “rhythm, tone, feeling, or genre” (Kluchin 70). However, the text’s written form is not really a barrier to semiotic analysis. That is to say, “the rhythm of a line of text belongs to the semiotic just as thoroughly as the rise and fall of a human voice” (Kluchin 70). Thus, Kristeva’s theories are applicable to written forms of texts, as well as verbal ones.

Drives along with affect belong to the semiotic function of language. The relationship between the drives and the semiotic is direct. It is the semiotic which “signals the entrance of the drives into language” (Kluchin 70). Just as the presence of the semiotic coexists with drives, the passiveness of the symbolic activates them. That is to say “The motility of the subject and the subject’s ability to change are the result of the interplay of semiotic drive force and symbolic stasis” (Oliver, *The Portable Kristeva* xxi). Kristeva asserts the presence of the semiotic function more or less in all types of texts. The analysis of texts and their signification depends upon “the presence of the semiotic within every signifying event, that register of feeling, rhythm, tone, drive, without which structure, syntax, and grammar fail to mean” (Kluchin 75). What the word means in Kristevan mindset is a mixture “of dynamic bodily drive force or affect and stable symbolic grammar” (Oliver, *The Portable Kristeva* xviii). The drive force is bodily for Kristeva in the sense that it originates in human body in order to satisfy “desires”, while affect is its manifestation, whether “physical” or “psychic” (Oliver, *The Portable Kristeva* xxii). Thus, affects and drives work hand in hand in their contribution to the semiotic aspect of texts and their interpretation. Kluchin asserts that “texts have visceral effects on readers, that they work on readers in distinctive ways to transmit affect, and that these effects are integral to the ways in which they should be understood” (168). The affects of fear, horror, dread, love, etc. can be traced in works of fiction as substantial elements of discussion.

Affects play a vital role in the semiotic function of language. Kelly divides them into three types: the “positive” ones include “interest-excitement” and “enjoyment-joy,” the “neutral” ones include “surprise-startle,” and the “negative”

ones include “fear-terror, distress-anguish, anger-rage, disgust-dissmell, shame-humiliation” (164). The coined word, *dissmell*, means, “the automatic response we have when we smell something rotten” (Kelly 176). In analyzing works of literature, these can be traced in the type of genre of the text, silences and pauses, different sorts of deprivation in characters, their social collectiveness, and the features of poetic language in the text itself. In addition to this, the readers’ identification with the characters contributes to the affective aspect of a text.

### **Affect in *Passage***

*Passage* is a science fiction, which contains certain “modes of affect” that are related to fantasy and horror (Cherry 52). In such a text, “encounters with disruptive bodily affects” is prevalent (Kee 49). The primary setting of Willis’ novel is a hospital in winter times, both helping the deathly atmosphere. Vielle, a nurse and Joanna’s close friend, mentions embalming frequently throughout the course of the story. The emergency room is described by Vielle through a simile, as “like a tomb” (Willis 7). This is both because of the frequent presence of possible goners and the location of the emergency room, which is at the ground level, below all the other floors of the hospital. Snowy weather is, likewise, depicted by Vielle as the “Heart attack weather” (7) and by Joanna as “Car accident weather. Dying weather” (10). Winter’s connotations of death and horror is the reason why this season has been used as the setting of the novel. Even while Joanna herself describes her NDE, the setting of this experience is likewise cold, the night Titanic crashed the iceberg. On the ship, “The walls were white, and so were the doors” (144). Joanna’s description of the people on board includes, “he was wearing a white jacket . . . The other woman was in white, too . . . Her hands were white, too . . . The man had a trimmed white beard” (144). In order to connote the chilly atmosphere, Joanna delineates the place and people as all white, the color of snow and winter. Finally, when she does die, she describes the sky as “still as death” (456). The use of these death-related words by Willis contribute to the creation of the affect of fear all throughout the novel.

There are descriptions in *Passage* that are horrific to connote death, while they could be accounted in more mediated words. In such cases, “readers have to burden their memory with these horrific descriptions until they reach the” significance of those words later in the novel (El-Sayed 238). In *Passage*, one of the patients’ smile is described as “a little wolfish” (11). Later, this character, Greg Menotti, is seen by Joanna during her NDE simulations. Thus, the horrific description and the activation of fear become significance, when it appears in Joanna’s experience of death, as

well. The other instance is Maisie, who is a child in the hospital and a friend of Joanna. She is interested in disasters and informs others about the knowledge she acquires about this subject. However, as Richard, Joanna's colleague, puts it, "She really goes for the gory details" (46). It is when she points out how children have seen their parents being burned in Hindenburg. Hence, she refers to the most violent part of the incident. This is how she is trying to make sense of her own possible upcoming death. The mutual point between the patients who encounter death is that Joanna finds "the same terror, the same despair" in their tone of voice (94). This is when they describe what they have gone through. Although they say different things, mostly neutral, the fear of death is detected in their voice.

The characteristics of horror genre can be detected in *Passage*. One of these features is the "explorations of the borders between life and death" (Kee 49). This is manifested in *Passage* in Joanna's simulation of NDE. In these experiments, which for her happen on the Titanic, the door of the passage she finds herself in is the boundary between life and death. There, on the Titanic, she inspects the untraveled world of death. In one of such scenes, when she is trying to return to the passage, which is the only means for her to recover consciousness, she passed "the light. Into the passage, and into darkness. And more darkness. What happened? Joanna thought, panic clutching at her. Why didn't I go back" (209). Later, when she is murdered, she fully experiences this panic, knowing there is actually no way back. This exploration for Joanna, as well as the readers, is always accompanied by senses of dread, horror, and even panic.

The words in any types of contexts strive to convey messages, whether straightforward or complicated. However, in Kristevan mindset, not only do the words contain meaning, but also silences and pauses are meaningful affective aspects of texts. According to Zappen, "the literary imagination that Kristeva so frequently celebrates can capture affective-symbolic moments not only in words, such as the fractured orthography of the text messages, but in sights and sounds and silences" (307). In Willis' novel, Joanna interviews patients who undergo NDE in the hospital. During these interviews, Joanna asserts, "most people, when confronted with a silence, would talk to fill it, and all the interviewer had to do was wait" (3). Thus, instead of constantly asking for more information, she waits in silence. The silence is more effective than questions in making an affective connection with interviewees and leading them to give a blow-by-blow account of their NDEs. The opposite is also applicable. That is to say, sometimes Joanna is confronted by the pauses of the interviewees. For instance, Mr. Sage's interview is "followed by an interminable pause while Joanna waited for him to add something" (92). That

is because it is hard for them to transfer a semiotic experience into the symbolic world of the language. Pauses can arouse the affect of excitement, as well. At one moment, "There was a pause. Maybe he's leaving, Joanna thought hopefully" (26). When Joanna and Richard are stuck in the staircase, they listen to silences and they speculate on whether they can escape from Maurice Mandrake, the man Joanna does not want to encounter.

For Richard, speculations are not limited to only this one part of the novel. When he is listening to his voice messages, one of his friends' message is a mysterious one, which arouses the affect of interest. His message on the phone goes,

"Wright?" a man's voice said. Peter Davis, his roommate when they were interns. He never bothered to identify himself. "I suppose you've heard," Davis said. "I can't believe it about fox, can you? This isn't some kind of virus, is it? If so, you'd better get vaccinated. Or at least call and warn me before you hit the star. Call me." He wondered what that was all about. The only Fox he knew was R. John Foxx, a neuropsychologist who'd been conducting research on anoxia as the cause of near-death experiences . . . Davis again, even more incomprehensible than before. "Forgot to tell you where. Seventeen. Under phantom," followed by an unrecognizable tuneless humming. Housekeeping. (43)

Davis' message is full of empty spaces, left to be guessed, like a riddle. Such "empty spaces" (Zappen 304) are the tools the narrator can use to "invite readers to share" the characters' "life-altering decisions and connect the discontinuous elements of" the plot (Zappen 300). Richard has to guess who the caller is, who he is talking about, and what he is referring to. The empty spaces are not exhausted here. His last message is that of Joanna, which is supposed to be a vital one, determining whether she finally joins the project or not. However, since the answering machine is full, he can merely hear the beginning of the voice message and loses the rest. Then he again has to estimate what the message would contain.

Sometimes in works of fiction, the characters undergo traumatic events, are deprived of their rights, or lose what they love or need. Besides their "mental aspect", traumatic events have the "ability to oppress and consume the individual" (Sherman 11). These sorts of experience are sometimes repressed and then expressed in the semiotic side of communication. The characters' reactions to traumatic events may differ. However, mainly, "Visualizing something that is an invisible, abstract

psychological concept via an essential element of life such as water is an extremely poignant means of understanding the self and others” (Sherman 5). That is why in works of literature, media, and even in *Passage* itself, death, which is being deprived of life, is depicted as somehow related to water. At any rate, traumas or losses are mostly faced through invisible concepts. Apart from NDEs, Alzheimer’s disease is a form of gradual death, a traumatic situation which gradually deprives the person from memories and abilities. For Mr. Briarley, who used to be Joanna’s English literature teacher and who presently suffers from the same disease, reciting lines from works of literature is a strategy to face the situation. Such characters undergo the gradual loss of “control over reality as” their “mind becomes immersed in chaos” (Staels 982). At this point, Joanna becomes obsessed with the memories of high school, Mr. Briarley, and how she can solve the mystery of NDE, without his help, due to his condition.

The other character who faces great loss is Kit, Mr. Briarley’s niece. On the day of her wedding, her fiancé, Kevin, dies in an accident. Furthermore, she lives with Mr. Briarley and takes care of him. The positive affect of interest is what she utilizes to save herself. When Joanna asks her to look for a book or pieces of information among Mr. Briarley’s big library, she savors the process and takes full advantage of it. When Joanna asks her whether it is problematic for her she replies, “‘It gives me something to think about besides—it’s kind of fun,’ she amended, ‘a sort of treasure hunt’” (198). Thus, she enjoys spending her time searching for things, so that she evades her own problems.

The other character who experiences trauma is Coma Carl, who used to have life-like nightmares when he was in the coma. He thought he was stuck in a canyon with apaches and rattlesnakes around. There he tried different ways to escape or at least send a rescue message. The experience has been so difficult for him that he does not dare to talk about it now. This is while when he looks out of the window of his house, which happens to be in the mountain, he stares at the river, which “flowed dark and clear, half under and half over a thin film of ice” (424). In spite of his reticence, this act conveys how the stream resembles his own life. His time in the coma is like he is half frozen. He cannot move or speak; he is blocked in a threatening exploration of a canyon, though he is alive and the blood flows in his body.

Richard suffers tremendously after losing Joanna. In addition to being co-workers in a project, they are somehow emotionally attached. Moreover, Richard feels guilty for her death, since she was looking for him in her last breath, while he had his pager off. Next, Joanna had beforehand asked him to save her, in case of



trouble. Finally, it was Richard whom Joanna's last words were addressed to. All these pose a serious threat to his mental health. One of the ways for coping with loss is for people "to lose themselves in their work" (Staels 982). Richard, after some days of shock, tries to work out what Joanna's last words meant. After a while, he realizes that "He had somehow managed to deny it, in all his running around, making maps, graphing scans, questioning nurse's aides" and that "their obsession with Joanna's last words had simply been another form of denial" (435). Searching for clues to what has been Joanna's untold discovery helps him finally recover from mourning her abrupt death.

Poetic language belongs to the semiotic aspect of language, which adds affective weight to a text. The semiotic as "the transverbal language of primitive bodily drives and affects", here, is represented "in signifying elements such as tone, laughter, symptomatic discursive repetition, the rhythm and musicality of poetic language (alliteration and assonance), and in poetic figures of speech (metaphor and metonymy)" (Staels 979). Inherently, the language becomes poetic through utilizing figures of speech.

Imageries are one of the poetic devices used by Willis to transfer the affect of striving for truth to the audience. For instance, auditory imagery, in the form of two noises is constantly repeated in *Passage*. One is the sound heard immediately after losing consciousness by patients. Various characters wonder whether it is "a ringing or a buzzing" (124). The other is Joanna's pager, which frequently beeps. It happens at times when Joanna is restless to know the mystery of death and the reasons behind each step of the NDE, including the ringing or buzzing. This activates the affect of interest in the audience, as well.

In line with the affect of interest activated by auditory imagery, the organic and gustatory imageries are also influential in conveying the same affect to the audience. Joanna's thirst for knowing the truth, suspended to be quenched, is paralleled to her constant starvation throughout the novel. This is while the cafeteria is almost always closed. Joanna herself confirms, "It had the shortest hours of any hospital cafeteria Joanna had ever seen, and she was always coming down for lunch to find its glass double doors locked" (7). As the cafeteria is closed, the truth is out of reach for her, as well. However, the truth to her seems transparent, like the food seen within the glass doors of the cafeteria, albeit not accessible. She herself thinks the hint to figuring out the truth "stayed tantalizingly there at the edge of her memory, just out of reach" (74). Even when, in a rare moment, she reaches in the cafeteria, Mr. Mandrake, the colleague she avoids to meet is also there. Therefore, she has to leave the place immediately and go as far as she can. The reason why she hides

herself from him, although he is mostly found on her way, is that he conducts false interviews with the patients in the hospital and, this way, turns the cases into nutcases. He symbolically stands as a major barrier to her attempts at finding the truth. This is while whenever Joanna is hungry, he asks Richard for food. At the same time, it is Richard's project which provides her with the opportunity to reach the reality of death.

The other literary device which advocates the affect of interest is spatial imagery. When Greg, one of the patients dies, "he was somewhere else, Joanna thought. Like Coma Carl. Somewhere too far for her to come" (25). Joanna's perception is that whoever becomes unconscious, goes into coma, or dies altogether is not conscious of the world around him or her, as if (s)he has gone to a far place. Thus Joanna describes seeing someone's dying as, "it hadn't felt like Greg Menotti had shut down or ceased to exist. It was as if he'd vanished" (24). The spatial imagery helps her talk of the state of life and death as where they happen to locate, as relative to each other.

In order to activate the affect of interest in the readers, repetitions can also be significant, especially when they lead to circularity. Joanna's presence in *Passage* begins with her interviewing one of the patients in the hospital, Richard's looking for her, and her arrival in the emergency room, in which Vielle works. Later, when Joanna is going toward death, she first interviews a patient, through which she solves the mystery of NDEs, she then naturally looks for Richard everywhere to tell him about her discovery and then, in order to meet Vielle, she goes to the emergency room, where she is attacked, stabbed, and consequently murdered.

Another instance of repetition, which leads to the affect of interest is the number fifty-eight. This is one of the last words Greg Menotti says repeatedly just before dying. Joanna searches for this number in Greg's phone numbers and addresses, albeit she finds no traces. Her obsession to know the meaning Greg was trying to convey leads her to see this number everywhere, like the number of rooms, box numbers, years, plates and the "gas station" (53). She even googles the number. She later decides, "The number fifty-eight had always been there, just like every other number, but her brain had been put on alert to look for it, like a hiker cautioned to watch for snakes (54). The repetition of the word plus the final simile are the devices helpful in activating the affect of interest.

Metaphor is the other element of figurative speech which evokes the affect of interest. When, in a case of a "metaphor," Vielle compares Richard to "a screenplay," Joanna, spontaneously, contemplates "the feeling, out of nowhere, that she knew what Greg Menotti had been talking about" (74). This is because

what she finally finds out is that NDE is a metaphoric images the brain sends in order to ask for help at the last moments of life. However, what Vielle means is that Joanna must option Richard, quite like a screenplay. In other words, she must buy the right to own him in the future, so that if she decides to marry him, he can be within her reach. Kristeva sees metaphors as, semiotically speaking, “a radical form of othering” (Pint 93). Hence, Richard is a screenplay being optioned because his female colleagues, especially nurses, ask whether he is single and express their interest in his appearance. The competition is to achieve the right to have him. This is while for Richard, Joanna is “an island of sanity and sense in a field full of cranks and nutcase” (101). By this metaphor, Richard differentiates Joanna from the rest of specialists in the field of psychology, as an island stands apart from the ocean.

Apart from interest, when it comes to NDE novels, the affect of fear is also worthy of recognition. In order to elaborate on the reports Joanna has recorded concerning NDEs, she asserts, “Eleven percent report a completely negative experience—a gray, empty void or frightening figures. I’ve only had one who experienced a traditional hell—flames, smoke, demons” (68). By the help of visual imagery, she accomplishes what she sets out to do, i. e. conveying the affect of hellish fear to the audience. The other instance is a simile, when Joanna describes Mr. Mandrake as, “like a wolf on the fold” (80). This is because he strives to reach the NDE patients sooner than Joanna and shape their innocent accounts into whatever he wills.

Simile is another of literary devices which contribute to the semiotic affect in the novel. When Vielle considers Joanna’s general health has deteriorated, she describes her “white as a ghost” (230). Here, the affect transferred is anguish. Joanna is suffering from the anguish of not knowing the meaning of what she experiences through her NDE simulations. She feels she can help patients in need, like Maisie, only if she finds out the secrets behind her NDEs. The other instance of simile depicts identification and empathy between characters. After Joanna is stabbed to death, Richard’s guilty conscience repeatedly makes him feel various things to be “like a knife going in” (351 and 354).

As soon as Joanna discovers the mechanism of NDEs, she is accidentally murdered. What Joanna goes through after losing consciousness and death and what her friends have to face are narrated together in alternative chapters. As long as Richard remains clueless about what Joanna intended to tell him, Joanna is all in darkness after death. However, when he finally figures out her message, “Joanna saw that the sky had turned a pale, lovely lavender, and all around them, lavender-pink in the growing light, were glittering icebergs” (454). The visual imagery here

depicts the contrast between the darkness of ignorance full of fear and the joyful light knowledge brings about, between the death drive and jouissance.

When it comes to the semiotic aspect of language in the Kristevan sense of it, the fluidity of meaning is expressed. This is a process, which “may result either in violence and aggressivity (the death drive) or in a flow of jouissance (an instinct for pleasure and life) expressed in poetic language, and in a sense of liberation” (Staels 979-980). This is directly related to what lies inside us. Kristeva’s “Doppelgänger motif” consists of “a ‘benevolent’ and ‘malevolent’ double — the latter ‘an alien double, uncanny and demoniacal,’ representing the affects and drives which the self represses” (Staels 982). Thus, the characters, based on their inner drives are driven toward life or death. The central conflict in an NDE novel is between life after death or death as the ultimate destination of humanity.

Life drive is associated with the positive forces of life, which can be manifested in language. One of the affects which can lead to the activation of life drive is “joy” (Staels 985). In Willis’ novel, the character Tish is one of the nurses in Mercy General Hospital, who later becomes an assistant in Richard’s project. There is a gathering of doctors and nurses, called “Happy Hour” (15), which Tish regularly attends. As the name suggests, this is the time for socialization and eating together, both for the aim of happiness. While characters like Joanna and Richard spend day and night working on a project about death, Tish enjoys her time after work in Happy Hour. It is not that Tish only enjoys her time after work. Even when she is at the hospital, which is not inherently a happy place, she is used to laughing “a tinkling laugh” (16). Hence, her manners are joyfully lively, activating drives which pull her toward life rather than death.

The other character which manifests life drive is Maisie’s mother, Mrs. Nellis. Despite the hard condition of her daughter’s heart, she “won’t even acknowledge the possibility that Maisie might die” (29). She is always in a buoyant mood and an atmosphere of optimism dominates her vision. When Joanna asks her about Maisie’s condition, “‘Really well,’ Mrs. Nellis said enthusiastically. ‘This new antiarrhythmia drug’s working wonderfully, much better than the one she was on before. I’ve seen enormous improvement’” (36). Every time she is asked the same question, she gives back similar answers. This is while the nurses admit that Maisie is not doing as well as her mother strives to believe. Barbara, one of the nurses admits, “Maisie’s mother is Cleopatra, the Queen of Denial. And positive thinking. All Maisie has to do is rest and think happy thoughts, and she’ll be up and around in no time” (41). Thus, optimism and joy describe her reaction toward her daughter’s sickness and process of treatment respectively. Her method finally works. That is to say, Maisie is revived

after coding and makes it to her operation, when a heart is available.

Contrary to Tish and Mrs. Nellis, Joanna is the character who constantly manifests signs of death drive. The quotes which begin the main sections of *Passage* are all concerned with death drive. These quotes bespeak the mood of the main character, who is no one, but Joanna Lander. As soon as she joins Richard's project, her friend, Vielle, senses danger. However, apparently nothing goes wrong, up until Joanna resorts to playing the role of a subject. At this stage, Vielle sees her as "a human guinea pig", who is doing "something so dangerous" (118). This is while her joining the project is when Joanna officially enters the route of death. When Joanna insists NDE might work as a "survival mechanism", Vielle, in order to avoid the inevitable tragedy, asserts, "Trust me, I see death every day, and the best survival mechanism is staying as far away from it as possible" (118). This is what Joanna fails to do, since not only does she interview the subjects in a death-related project, but also she becomes a subject herself.

Besides Joanna, Maisie and Kit are the two other characters going toward death. Maisie is hospitalized, due to the severity of her heart disease. Every time Joanna visits her, she admits she has got worse. Kit has lost her fiancé on her wedding day and has to cope with her uncle, who happens to have the Alzheimer's disease. Joanna repeatedly talks of "Kit's painfully thin collarbones" and "her shadowed eyes" (200). The two characters, Maisie and Kit are foil, since they share a multitude of similarities. First, as soon as Joanna meets Kit for the first time, she realizes Kit "had short, fair hair like Maisie's" (175). Second, when Kit, in a manner similar to Maisie, asks Joanna to stay longer, she "sounded just like Maisie" (198). Third, when Joanna is doubtful whether to tell Kit the whole truth, she remembers, "Kit reminded her of Maisie in more ways than one, and Maisie hated not being told the truth" (200). Even though Joanna is herself moving toward death, she manages to save both the above characters. Her discovery saves Maisie's life, while her suggestions to Kit about using eldercare sometimes and involving her in research and also Dish Night literally saves her, as well. At least, Joanna's death is not without good cause.

Emotional encounters in works of literature have affective significance. Love and "reconciliation" can be expressed in the form of an "embrace" (Staels 988). This is while hatred and "fury" can be expressed in the form of a wild "dancing" (Staels 985). In either case, the expression is helpful to the character's maintenance. In other words, in order to avoid "silence, meaninglessness and uncontrolled (self-) destructive energy", it is essential to continue "acknowledging unconscious drives and affects, and expressing them in the 'disruptive' language of signification" (Staels

988). Thus, receiving emotional support and detoxifying harmful energies contribute to preventing self-destructiveness. In *Passage*, while Joanna manifests signs of self-destructiveness, Richard is mainly oblivious to her very emotional and physical state. Almost all his presence in the novel is restricted to his watching the scans, discussing them, and marshaling his arguments. However, only in one rare instance, when Joanna bursts into tears, “He was across the lab in two steps, his arms around her” (274). This support in the form of an embrace is what Joanna practically needs to overcome her emotional distress. Just before her next NDE simulation, “‘Richard,’ she said, groping blindly for his hand, ‘if it starts to sink, promise me you’ll come and get me’” (282). Nevertheless, all she receives at this moment is a frown. That is why she moves toward her self-destruction, almost at the speed of light.

The “affective identifications within larger social collectives” would “enable the characters to improve their personal and social relationships” (Zappen 300). The characters in *Passage* mainly assemble in a specific workplace, Mercy General Hospital. The colleagues and friends, Joanna and Vielle share one special night each week and that is called the “Dish Night,” a “weekly movie rental night” (38). This gathering gives them a sense of collectiveness and the affect of joy. Their quitting Dish Night due to their other concerns is simultaneous with tragic incidents happening to them. Vielle hides her being shot in the emergency room to avoid being scolded by Joanna, who had repeatedly warned her to transfer from that dangerous section. Joanna is too preoccupied with the meaning of her NDE that she does not find time for Dish Night. This happens shortly before Joanna’s death.

The same sense can be detected when Joanna joins Richard’s project concerning NDE. At the moment of her approval, Richard says, “‘I’m delighted. It’s going to be great working together’”; then “Richard looked happily at her. ‘This is exactly the kind of thing I was hoping you’d help me with . . . We’re going to make a great team.’ Joanna smiled back at him” (48-49). The words, ‘delight’, ‘happily’, and ‘smiled’ clearly depict the affect of joy. This is a fresh beginning for both of them to, from now on, gather together for one single aim and that is discovering the mechanism of NDEs. The attempt to get “familiar” with this mechanism leads to “a circulation of affective energy” (Zappen 305). This energy has consequences on the rest of the project and their relationship. However, later, Richard is so absorbed in his research and study of scans that he is oblivious to his surroundings. His colleagues in the lab, Joanna and Tish, repeatedly feel he is blasé about whatever they are telling her, whether Tish’s flirtations or Joanna’s concerns about her accounts of NDE and their meanings. When Joanna finally dies, Richard instantly simulates NDE on himself, in a vain hope to revive her. However, his NDE is filled

with the affect of distress, since “He remembered Joanna talking about climbing up to the Boat Deck. How many decks had she said she’d climbed? He couldn’t remember. I should have paid more attention” (346). He feels guilty for her death because he thinks he could save her if he listened to her more. The outcome of avoiding social relations can at best be the waste of time and at worst loss of life. As soon as Joanna is murdered, Richard, Vielle, Kit, and Maisie make a team to figure out what Joanna intended to tell Richard in her last breath. Each covers one aspect of this investigation, up until, with the attribution of each and every one of them, especially Maisie, the puzzle is solved.

Thus, the lack of social collectiveness has exactly the opposite outcome, which is destructive. This happens when the characters begin to deviate from each other, without paying attention to what the other ones say. The central conflict of the novel is the meaning of NDEs and what the brain accomplishes through them. What Joanna, after making sustained effort and risking her very life, realizes is that NDE is the distress message the dying brain sends to all cells in order to find a way to reactivate the vital organs. The one who has tried tirelessly to tell Joanna NDE is a message, although meaning it in a superstitious way, is Mr. Mandrake, whom Joanna constantly makes a detour not to meet. When she finally tells him, “I should have listened to you in the first place” (333), she is indirectly admitting interacting with Mr. Mandrake could be more fruitful to her because she could find hints amid his seeming nonsense. The other person Joanna constantly avoids is Mr. Wojakowsky, one of the subjects in their project, who happens to be a talkative liar present everywhere Joanna goes. Just before she reaches the elevator to go to the emergency room for the last time in her life, she meets him. At that moment, Mr. Wojakowsky tells her about the officer on the ship who was so much in a hurry all the time that he “wasn’t looking where he was going, and he stepped in an open hatch and fell two full decks. Broke both legs. Spent the next year and a half in a hospital on Oahu” (331). If Joanna had listened to his story and learned the lesson, she could have escaped death. She was so much engrossed in delivering her finding that she was rushing into the emergency room without seeing the teenager with the knife.

Readers of stories are sometimes invited, through affective terms, to identify with the characters. It is specifically true, when “The novel is sympathetic toward its characters and illustrative of the potential of affective identifications to bind characters to other characters and to readers” (Zappen 306). One of the ways to engage readers in the text is through the sense of mystery. That is to say, “readers need to draw these conclusions for themselves, to identify affectively with” the

characters (Zappen 304). In *Passage*, when Joanna finds “a postcard of a tropical ocean at sunset with palm trees silhouetted blackly against the red sky and coral-pink water” in her pocket, she wonders, “Where had she gotten that? She turned it over. ‘Having wonderful time. Wish you were here,’ someone had written over an illegibly scrawled signature” (8). Here, the readers are invited to contemplate who that person can be; hence the affect of excitement. While this question is never answered in the novel, this postcard foreshadows the events after Joanna’s death. This is because when she dies, she finds herself in the middle of an ocean awaiting her fate. Thus, symbolically, it can be death wishing for her reunion. The other instance of this sense of mystery and affect of excitement is when Joanna and Richard, in order to avoid meeting Mr. Mandrake, get into a stairway. There, “A strip of yellow ‘Do Not Cross’ tape stretched across the stairway. Below it, the stairs gleamed with shiny, wet, pale blue paint” (23). This ‘Do Not Cross’ message, apart from the staircase, warns the two doctors not to cross the boundaries of life and death. It is because at the same moment they are discussing their project, concerning NDEs, for the first time. Another instance is when Joanna is repeatedly reminded of something, but she cannot exactly remember what it is. When NDE is experimented on her, she “spent the remainder of the afternoon and evening trying to place it”, to find out where she has been during the NDE simulation (128). While she describes what she sees around her, the reader is invited to guess where she really is. When she finally realizes it is Titanic, among all the other memories her brain could choose from, she begins to “have this strong feeling that I know where the memory came from” (160). She spends hours concentrating on this issue, while the diverse things she remembers are outlined for the reader to identify with the protagonist and strive to solve the puzzle like her.

Amid the minute description of a short time span of Joanna’s life and death, her first-hand experience of what happens after her heart goes flatline is of paramount importance through the course of novel. The account of her death and the events after it are so meticulous that the reader is automatically invited to identify with her. This is made possible by the metaphoric language of Willis. Joanna, when she finds herself again on Titanic after her real death, realizes she herself is “the ship that’s going down” (341). When Joanna is accidentally stabbed in the emergency room, she feels she is drowning in blood. While she chronicles the moments leading up to her ultimate death, she simultaneously reports her presence on Titanic. There, she finds the passage which she used to enter in order to become conscious during her simulations, “is underwater” (339). Her unexpected death is compared to the unexpected incident of Titanic. As “An iceberg gashed her side”, Joanna



“remembered her blouse and the little ooze of blood” (340). Both events seem as unsubstantial at first; however, casualties stem from them. The passage which is flooding is symbolically Joanna’s windpipe, which is blocked and does not let Joanna transfer her message to Richard. The message is the real meaning of NDEs and the mechanism of brain at the traumatic moment of death which can eventually contribute to the cure of patients in hard conditions and close to death.

### Conclusion

An NDE novel, like Connie Willis’ *Passage*, is primarily about making sense of death. *Passage* is specifically a novel about disasters and the unexpectedness of death. In this novel, traumatic events are included which yield to a semiotic study of affect and drives. Based on the theories of Julia Kristeva in this regard, *Passage* manifests moments of silence, traumatic events, and poetic language in which various types of affect can be detected. Positive affects of jouissance and negative ones of death drive dominate different characters. This is while positive emotional responses and social collectiveness can be effective in overcoming difficulties. The cumulative effect of human bonds can even lead to life and death situations. In other words, characters lose their lives as a result of the lack of such a bond and revive by virtue of camaraderie. At the same time, the readers are invited to identify with the characters at their most critical moments.

### Works Cited

- Badley, Linda. “Cine-Limbo: The Millennial/New Age Virtual Afterlife Thriller.” *Studies in Popular Culture*, vol. 28, no. 1, 2005, pp. 1-14.
- Carpenter, Victoria, and Paul Halpern. “Out of the Darkness into the Darkness: Time Travel in Ernesto Sábato’s *El Túnel* and Connie Willis’ *Blackout* and *All Clear*.” *Interface between Literature and Science: Cross-disciplinary Approaches to Latin American Texts*, edited by Victoria Carpenter. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015, pp. 91-114.
- Cherry, Brigid. *Horror*. London, UK: Routledge, 2009.
- Duckwitz, Brian Richard. *Hearts of Darkness and Black Holes: Metaphor in Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness and Connie Willis’ “Schwarzschild Radius”*. 2001. Iowa State University, Master’s thesis. Available at:  
<https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=17258&context=rtd>
- El-Sayed, Wesam. “Language Performativity and Horror Fiction: A Cognitive Stylistic Approach.” *International Journal of Language and Literary Studies*, vol. 3, no. 3, 2021, pp. 225-243.
- Kee, Jessica Baker. “Black Masculinities and Postmodern Horror: Race, Gender, and Abjection.”

*Visual Culture & Gender*, vol. 10, 2015, pp. 47-56.

Kelly, Vernon C. "A Primer of Affect Psychology." *The Art of Intimacy and the Hidden Challenge of Shame*, 2009, pp. 158-191.

Kelso, Sylvia. "Connie Willis's Civil War: Re-dreaming America as science fiction." *Foundation*, 1998, pp. 67-76.

Kluchin, Abigail Suzanne. *The Allure of Affect: Rigor, Style, and Unintelligibility in Kristeva and Irigaray*. PhD dissertation, Columbia University, 2012. Available at:  
<https://academiccommons.columbia.edu/doi/10.7916/D86D5R1G>

Oliver, Kelly. *Reading Kristeva: Unraveling the Double-Bind*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1993.

—. *The Portable Kristeva*. New York: Colombia UP, 2002.

Pint, Kris. "'Brasilia Is Blood on a Tennis Court': Julia Kristeva's 'Semiotic' and the Embodied Metaphors of Lispector." *Writingplace*, no. 4, 2020, pp. 85-103.

Sherman, Zachery A. *Leading a Horse to Water: Investigating the Semiotic Motif of Water and Drowning in BoJack Horseman*. 2021. Rochester Institute of Technology. Henrietta, Rochester, New York, United States, Master's thesis. Available at:  
<https://scholarworks.rit.edu/theses>

Staels, Hilde. "A Poetic Encounter with Otherness: The Ethics of Affect in Michael Ondaatje's Anil's Ghost." *University of Toronto Quarterly*, vol. 76, no. 3, 2007, pp. 977-989.

Willis, Connie. *Passage*. New York: Bantam Books, 2001.

Wolfe, Gary K. "Connie Willis: An Introduction." *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, vol. 22, no. 3, 2011, pp. 313-314.

Zappen, James P. "Affective Identification in Jennifer Egan's A Visit from the Goon Squad." *Lit: Literature Interpretation Theory*, vol. 27, no. 4, 2016, pp. 294-309