



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Section: *Philosophy & Religion***Narrative and the production of religious meaning: A narratological reading of A Small Death and Mawlana**Abdeddayem Sellami¹, Mohamad Abdullah Alsaied^{1*}, Mai Omar Ali Almemari¹, Mariam Khamis Saeed Alnuaimi¹, Mohamed Abdulbaset Alhammadi¹ & Jamila Alderei¹¹Mohamed bin Zayed University for Humanities Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates*Correspondence: mohamad.alsaied@mbzuh.ac.ae**ABSTRACT**

This study examines how religious meaning is produced within narrative rather than merely represented through religious discourse, symbols, or references. Focusing on Mohammed Hasan Alwan's *A Small Death* and Ibrahim Eissa's *Mawlana*, it argues that religious signification arises not from the density of religious vocabulary but from the way human experience is organized within the narrative structure itself. The analysis distinguishes between religious discourse, understood as thematic material present with varying intensity, and religious meaning, understood as an interpretive function generated through narrative construction. Building on this distinction, the study traces religious meaning through three interrelated stages: experience, plot, and time. Experience constitutes the point of departure, as characters' lived trials of faith, freedom, and responsibility generate meaning gradually rather than through direct statement. Plot then composes these scattered experiences into a coherent structure, linking events so that each illuminates those preceding and following it. Time subsequently reinterprets this structure through memory and recollection, allowing earlier events to acquire significations unavailable at the moment of their occurrence. Despite the divergence between Alwan's contemplative, Sufi world and Eissa's media-driven, socially embedded one, both novels converge in this three-part process. The study further extends this framework into the act of reading, drawing on Martha Nussbaum's account of narrative empathy, Wayne Booth's notion of fictional company, and Paul Ricœur's concept of practical wisdom to show how religious meaning migrates from the narrative world into the reader's moral consciousness. Empathy generated through sustained engagement with the characters cultivates in readers a disposition to suspend hasty judgment, while practical wisdom emerges as the enduring effect of this engagement on ethical understanding. The study concludes by proposing narrative structure, rather than religious content, as the primary object for studying religion in the novel, opening a framework applicable to other narratives in which religious meaning forms through human experience.

KEYWORDS: narrative meaning, religious meaning, plot, narrative time, narrative empathy, practical wisdom, contemporary Arabic novel

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Introduction

Religious meaning in narrative springs from the way it reshapes human experience, so that questions of faith, purpose, and responsibility become part of the horizon of interpretation. From this arises the distinction between the presence of religion in the novel and the formation of religious meaning within it: a story may abound with characters, symbols, rituals, and religious references, yet all of these remain mere elements of the fictional world, whereas signification arises from the experiences the characters undergo, from the relations woven by events, and from their organization within a structure that opens the event onto renewed possibilities of interpretation. The question therefore turns to how religion acquires its signification within the narrative structure, and to the process by which human experience comes to bear a meaning that exceeds the boundaries of the single event, so that attention shifts from tracking religious themes to tracing the narrative mechanisms through which meaning is formed.

The literature relating to the subject of this study divides into three main strands: the first is concerned with the relationship between narrative and ethics; the second focuses on representations of religion and its frames of reference in the modern novel; while the third is devoted to applied readings of specific novels, among them *A Small Death* and *Mawlana*. Despite their differences, these strands have concentrated their attention on religious discourse, intellectual frames of reference, or the moral effect of the novel, while the way in which religious meaning is generated from within the narrative structure itself has remained less prominent in the analysis. It is from this point that the present study proceeds, setting out to trace the formation of religious meaning through the narrative media that constitute human experience, organize it within the plot, have it reinterpreted by time, and are then completed in their effect by the act of reading.

This question acquires particular importance in the two novels *A Small Death* by Mohammed Hasan Alwan and *Mawlana* by Ibrahim Eissa. Despite the difference between the two domains to which the novels belong, they converge in making human experience a field for testing religious and moral questions. A first reading might suggest that Sufism in *A Small Death* and religious media in *Mawlana* lead toward two divergent horizons; further reading, however, reveals that this difference in subject matter conceals a shared narrative mechanism, namely the construction of signification through the development of experience, the succession of events, and time's recovery of what remains latent in the event by way of meaning. The choice of these two novels rests on the fact that they represent two different images of how religious meaning is formed in the contemporary Arabic novel: the first builds this meaning through the Sufi path and the experience of wandering, while the second proceeds from the public sphere, the religious institution, and the media — which makes it possible to test the study's hypothesis across two divergent narrative contexts.

Proceeding from this understanding, the research traces religious meaning through three interrelated analytical indicators: the first is that narrative experience reconstructs the character's relationship to the self, to the other, or to the world within a horizon connected to questions of faith, purpose, and responsibility; the second is that signification is generated from the development of events within the plot, apart from characters' direct statements; and the third is that this meaning remains open to interpretation, such that its signification is renewed as the reading progresses. On this basis, the presence of religious meaning is realized through the convergence of these indicators within the narrative structure, regardless of the density of religious vocabulary or discourse in the text.

These indicators are organized within a conception that holds that religious meaning is formed through a graduated process that begins with the experience lived by the characters; the plot then composes its elements; time reinterprets it; and reception then completes its effect in the form of a moral experience. From this perspective, the study's theoretical contribution lies in transforming "religious meaning" from a subject inferred from the presence of religious discourse, symbols, and frames of reference into a narrative process analyzable through the interaction of experience, plot, time, and reception. This framework makes it possible to study religion in the novel from the standpoint of how the narrative structure produces its signification, while also opening the possibility of applying it to the analysis of other novels in which religious signification is formed through human experience. On this basis, the research is organized into two sections: the first deals with the formation of religious meaning within the narrative world through experience, plot, and time, while the second examines the extension of this meaning into the act of reading through narrative empathy and practical wisdom.

Section One: The Formation of Religious Meaning in the Narrative World

Signification in the novel arises from the interaction of multiple elements and does not settle in a single event or a direct statement. The experience lived by the characters, the plot that composes that experience, and the time that rearranges it all combine to build a meaning that unfolds gradually, growing clearer as the reading advances. From here, narrative exceeds the condition of being a mere vessel for conveying ideas, becoming instead the space in which signification is generated from within human experience itself. This matter acquires particular importance in *A Small Death* and *Mawlana*, because the meaning that arises from this construction is connected, in both novels, to questions of faith, freedom, responsibility, and the search for truth — which calls for examining the way in which narrative produces religious meaning, rather than merely the presence of religious discourse within it.

Hence the analysis requires distinguishing between religious discourse and religious meaning. By religious meaning, this research intends that signification which does not rest in statements or frames of reference alone, but arises from the way human experience is organized within the narrative structure, such that questions of faith, freedom, responsibility, and the search for truth become part of the characters' movement rather than a subject separate from them. Religious meaning thus differs from religious discourse: the former is an interpretive function produced by the novel, while the latter represents material that may be present within it to varying degrees. This study therefore does not concern itself with tracking the presence of religious discourse so much as with showing how narrative produces a religious meaning that forms with experience and expands with reading. This section seeks to trace three complementary avenues: experience, as the starting point of meaning's formation; plot, as the framework that composes experience; and time, as the horizon that reinterprets it and confers upon it its final signification.

1. Narrative Experience and the Origin of Religious Meaning

How does religious meaning arise within the narrative world? The answer proves less simple than a first reading might suggest, for this meaning takes shape together with the experience lived by the characters, gradually acquiring its features as events fall into a single course, apart from ready-made discourses or ideas that precede the story. The event acquires its signification gradually as the narrative extends, remaining open to new possibilities of interpretation that widen as the reading advances and grow clearer each time the characters reconsider what they have lived, or the narrative rearranges that experience within the fictional structure. At this point, narrative experience becomes the first gateway to the production of religious meaning, since it is the field in which human experience intersects with questions of faith, purpose, and responsibility before settling into the form of a position or vision. *A Small Death* offers a clear example of this process from its opening pages. Ibn Arabi says: "How much this provision burdens the seeker of seclusion, and how it wastes me away when I keep vigil to witness the risings of the divine lights..." We consider that this statement places the reader before a beginning that remains open to possibility. Seclusion appears as a daily struggle, and the quest for knowledge comes intertwined with the hardship of the path. What is striking is that the novel prefers to defer the completion of this moment's signification: it continues to accompany the entire journey, recovering its meaning each time a new experience joins it. The reader may discover, after dozens of pages, that the beginning was richer than it seemed at the first encounter, and that the path itself was reshaping its bearer with every stage traversed.

This slowness in the character's formation may be among the most striking sources of strength in the narrative construction. Ibn Arabi learns, errs, retreats, then rearranges his understanding of the world in light of what he has lived. It sometimes happens that the reader returns, of their own accord, to scenes passed long before, seeing them now with a different eye, since the events have entered a wider network of relations, and each experience has come to illuminate another. Here experience acquires its density, for it continues to produce its meaning as the journey extends, and time becomes a partner in its construction rather than merely a frame within which events occur.

We read in *Mawlana* the statement: "The truth is that he did not think of religion as a set of rulings so much as he thought of it as a way of understanding life" — a statement that condenses the transformation on which the novel builds its narrative experience. Religion is no longer a system of rulings independent of experience, but becomes a way of understanding life through the situations and trials it imposes. The importance of this statement stems from its position within the character's trajectory: it comes after accumulated experiences

that have reshaped his view of self and other, so that religion becomes an experience to be lived before it is a discourse to be spoken. Here this trajectory converges with *A Small Death* in making experience the point of departure for the production of religious meaning, despite the difference between the two narrative worlds. The second novel moves into another space, where experience takes shape through daily contact with the religious institution, the media, and the public. From this intersection, Sheikh Hatem's consciousness begins to form in a different manner, even as the question driving the experience remains close to the one that accompanied Ibn Arabi. Sheikh Hatem moves within a space where the religious institution, the media, authority, and the public sphere converge, and from this daily contact arise questions that change as circumstances change, driving the character to reconsider his choices whenever conditions shift. The reader may sense that the novel's external movement is faster-paced than that of *A Small Death*, yet its internal effect proceeds at a comparable rhythm: every confrontation leaves a trace, and every trace opens a door to a fresh reconsideration, until consciousness becomes the outcome of a long accumulation in which experiences intertwine and moments of certainty and hesitation stand side by side.

What emerges from the foregoing is that the difference between the two novels is manifest in the path religious meaning follows within experience. In *A Small Death*, experience generates meaning through spiritual wandering and the striving, unveiling, and self-examination it imposes, whereas in *Mawlana* meaning arises from contact with the public sphere, media pressure, and the entanglement of religious with social responsibility. This difference means that each novel follows a distinct path to meaning, while both retain a single point of departure that makes human experience the primary field in which religion's signification is formed within the narrative.

The two novels converge, despite the difference of their worlds, precisely at this point. The Sufi path in *A Small Death* and the social path in *Mawlana* appear divergent at first glance, but the distance between them narrows as experience becomes the focus of reading. In both works, the characters enter the experience before grasping its outcomes; understanding comes later, after a succession of questions, a sequence of trials, and the recovery of what has passed in light of what has newly arisen. This convergence may run deeper than the apparent themes suggest, for religious meaning grows together with the experience the characters live, becoming clearer each time the narrative rearranges those experiences within a single construction. In this connection, Paul Ricoeur states: "Time becomes human time to the extent that it is articulated through a narrative mode, and narrative attains its full meaning when it becomes a condition of temporal existence." This conception offers a key to reading both novels. Experience, in itself, remains a set of adjacent events, then acquires another form when narrative composes it into a single course, so that events begin to illuminate one another, and each station becomes more capable of explaining what preceded and what followed it. This composition appears, at first glance, to be a mere ordering of the story, then reveals its extension into the construction of meaning itself, for the reader discovers that the relations arising between events carried more signification than the events did in isolation. From here the transition to plot becomes possible: if experience has given meaning its initial material, plot undertakes the task of composing this material into a coherent structure, so that every event becomes part of a wider whole, and the relations between experiences become a new source for producing meaning, not merely a means of ordering the succession of events.

2. Plot and the Composition of Experience

If experience gives meaning its initial material, how do these scattered experiences turn into a single signification? Here the role of plot emerges: it gathers events into a construction in which relations among them are determined, so that every experience becomes part of a wider course. At this point the event acquires a meaning that unfolds gradually as the narrative extends, since every occurrence becomes readable in light of what preceded and what followed it, and from this interaction a more complete picture of the experience borne by the narrative is generated. Ibn Arabi condenses this entire process in a phrase that seems, at first glance, a description of his biography, but which in fact reveals the very principle by which the novel is organized: "From the moment God brought me into being in Murcia until He took me in Damascus, I have been on an unceasing journey" — a statement preceded by another that prepares for it: "I saw lands, met people, and accompanied saints."

What is striking is that travel exceeds movement between places, becoming the very image in which the whole experience is organized. Meeting the masters, seclusion, journeys, love, loss, and unveiling are all

organized within a single course that acquires its meaning as experiences accumulate. The reader may pass by some of these events without pausing long over them, then return to them at a later stage to find their function within the structure transformed: what seemed a mere detail of the journey becomes a key to understanding the transformations that followed. Here plot begins to perform its true function: it composes distant experiences into a single experience, making every stage carry the trace of past stages while casting new light, at the same time, on what comes after it. Here one of the most important aspects of coherence in *A Small Death* becomes apparent. The novel gathers many events within a long biography, then continually reorganizes them, until the reader, at the journey's end, senses that every station had been participating in the construction of meaning since the moment of its appearance, even though that meaning remained deferred until the network of relations woven by the plot was complete.

The construction of plot changes in *Mawlana* according to the difference in the world within which the characters move. The novel makes successive confrontations the driver of the events' development, so that the temporal span becomes shorter and more concentrated than in *A Small Death*. Here the plot grows through the successive confrontations Sheikh Hatem undergoes, and through the characters who enter his life and then leave it, leaving behind a trace that extends beyond them. Dialogue becomes part of the structure's movement, just as inner reconsiderations become a natural extension of external events. In certain chapters, the reader may feel that the novel is straying from its main line with every new confrontation, only to discover that those confrontations had, since their appearance, been weaving a network of relations from which no single incident can be separated. This construction grows clearer still with the presence of the media: television interviews, public reactions, and the pressures they generate all play an active role in reshaping the characters' course, lending past events significations that were not apparent when they occurred. The difference in plot between the two novels relates to the nature of the world each constructs: the plot of *A Small Death* rests on extension and wandering, so meaning is generated from the accumulation of experiences and their reinterpretation over a long course, whereas the plot of *Mawlana* advances through successive crises and the reconsiderations and decisions they impose under the pressure of the public sphere, so meaning arises from the constant reassessment of positions as circumstances change.

The difference in plot construction between the two novels reveals that the rhythm of the story changes together with the course by which religious meaning is formed. Nonetheless, the two novels converge in the function plot performs within each. At this point the reader realizes that plot does not merely compose events but also composes the experience those events carry. This may be the reason certain scenes grow more present in memory after the reading is finished than they were on first encounter. Peter Brooks illuminates this aspect when he states: "Plot is the principle that gives narrative its movement and direction, making every part acquire its meaning in light of the whole." Ricœur, for his part, proposes another conception, writing: "Plot gathers multiple and disparate events and composes them into a single, complete story." This conception offers an important key to reading the two novels: the reader moves through the story driven by the desire to discover the image that unites its parts, and once that image is complete, they reconsider many of the events they had passed through before, which have now acquired a new function within the structure.

The two views converge more than the difference in terminology suggests: Brooks looks at plot from the standpoint of the movement that drives the reading toward its completion, while Ricœur focuses on its capacity to compose human experience itself. Reading *A Small Death* and *Mawlana* in light of these two conceptions shows that plot gives events more than mere ordering: it shapes them into a form that makes experience intelligible, revealing that meaning is generated from the relations that arise between events once they are organized within a single construction. Once experience settles within this construction, another question arises concerning what time does to it after its completion. Events return to consciousness, but they return with the angles from which they are viewed transformed, and every recovery reveals a meaning that was not apparent when the event occurred. From this movement, time begins to perform its function of reinterpreting experience, which leads to the next element.

3. Time and the Reinterpretation of Experience

Does meaning settle simply once experience is organized within the plot? The narrative soon reveals that time continues its work: it redistributes the significations of events, so that earlier occurrences recover their presence

from new vantage points, and the understanding of them, both the characters' and the reader's, changes accordingly. At this moment, time becomes an active element in the production of meaning, for it reinterprets events within the narrative course; what is meant by time here is the movement of reinterpretation accomplished by the narrative through memory and recollection, whereby the signification of events changes as experience widens and the past is reconsidered from a new vantage point. A Small Death reveals this mechanism clearly: Ibn Arabi narrates an experience spanning many years, yet time moves together with memory, so the character recovers stages of his journey after having traversed further stretches of knowledge and experience. This movement reaches its peak during the journey toward Mecca, when the tailor addresses him, saying: "I know that you are awaiting a peg [saint] in Africa, and this is what has delayed your journey to Mecca."

The value of this statement lies in its capacity to rearrange the whole course of the journey. The present reinterprets past events, granting them a meaning that was not apparent when they occurred, and the delay along the way becomes part of the logic of the experience after having seemed, at the time, a mere passing detail. Here time performs a function that exceeds the mere succession of events: it makes every stage readable anew in light of the stages that followed it, so the image of the past changes as experience widens. On this basis the journey acquires its unity from the way the narrative continually relinks its stations to one another, until its scattered stages become a single, coherent experience. As the reader nears the novel's end, they may feel they are constantly returning to its beginnings, yet this return now occurs through a different eye: the experience the character has accumulated has become part of the reader's own experience, so their understanding of the earlier events changes, and the past becomes wider than it seemed at the first encounter.

Time takes a different form in *Mawlana*, in keeping with the difference in narrative construction. The story unfolds over a shorter span than *A Small Death*, one in which events draw closer together and inner reconsiderations accelerate. Nonetheless, time retains its essential function: it continues to rearrange experience, revealing significations that were not apparent when the events occurred. What is striking is that the character recovers portions of what he has lived each time he finds himself before a new trial, so his understanding of what has happened changes, and the value of past experiences shifts with every turning point in the novel. The narrator of *Mawlana* does not let us forget that the Sheikh: "was not concerned with whether a matter was permissible or impermissible alone, but with what it entailed for people's lives." This statement comes after a series of confrontations that shifted Sheikh Hatem's position with respect to the events he had lived, so it appears more a summation of an entire course than a passing opinion. This reveals that time does not merely add a new experience but reorganizes prior experiences in light of their eventual outcome, so that they become part of a new understanding of the situation. The question occupying Sheikh Hatem is no longer about the ruling in the abstract, but about what is revealed to him, as experience extends, of that ruling's effects on people's lives. Hence the shift in his position becomes the result of a temporal process that has reinterpreted earlier events, rather than a sudden change of opinion.

Time thus becomes a medium that reshapes experience, revealing that meaning is not completed at the moment the event occurs but ripens with the succession of experiences. Paul Ricœur helps clarify this when he writes: "...practical wisdom finds no other recourse, within the framework of moral judgment in situation, than to have recourse to the primary intuition of ethics, namely the aim of the good life with and for others, within just institutions." This conception illuminates an aspect of how time works in the two novels. Moral judgment forms with the accumulation of experiences and with repeated returns to events in light of newly arisen experiences. This is what Ibn Arabi lives in *A Small Death*, as does Sheikh Hatem in *Mawlana*: each looks upon his past with an eye that time has changed, rearranging his experiences in a way that makes understanding itself part of the journey. The effect of time extends from the rearrangement of events within memory to the very way judgment itself is formed. The character does not view his past with the eye that lived it, but with an eye shaped by subsequent experiences, and so every return to the past becomes a reconsideration of the self as much as a reconsideration of events. The reader shares in this movement, perhaps without noticing: they too recover the earlier scenes in light of what has become of the characters' fates, so their initial judgments shift, and they become more inclined to hesitate before interpreting actions. This is perhaps the deepest effect of narrative time: it transforms the image of the past while at once redefining the reader's position with respect to it. At this point, the narrative construction meets moral experience, for the reinterpretation of events leads, at the same time, to a reinterpretation of the positions taken toward them. Time thus becomes a medium between the experience

the characters have lived and the understanding with which the reader leaves the novel, so every recollection becomes a new stage in the formation of meaning, not merely a return to what has passed. This may be one of the secrets of the effect the novel leaves on its reader: it invites the reader to live through this process, so that they leave carrying an awareness that human experience remains open to reconsideration, and that meaning continues to form as long as life goes on.

These findings lead to the conclusion that religious meaning passes through a course whose first link begins with experience; the plot then composes its elements, and time reinterprets it. Yet this course remains open, so long as the question remains suspended as to what happens to meaning after the story is complete: does it settle within the narrative world, or does it continue to form in the act of reading? From this question the second section begins, where attention shifts from the structure of narrative to the horizon it opens before the reader.

Section Two: Manifestations of Religious Meaning in the Act of Reading: Empathy and Practical Wisdom

If the first section was concerned with tracing how religious meaning is formed within the narrative world, this meaning does not exhaust its course at the boundaries of the text; for the story continues its work after its completion, and the characters leave their world for the reader's consciousness, where another stage of experience begins. The reader may turn the last page while the questions the novel raised remain present in their mind, continuing to reconsider certain positions that accompanied them during the reading. At this point, reception acquires a dimension that exceeds understanding to reach participation: the narrative experience enters into dialogue with the reader's own experience, prompting them to reconsider their view of the human being, of action, and of responsibility.

Within this horizon, this study examines the moral effect that narrative reading yields. This extension begins with the narrative empathy that arises from living alongside the characters and accompanying the transformations of their consciousness, then reaches its furthest extent in practical wisdom, as the farthest-reaching effect the novel leaves behind, when the experience the reader has lived within the text becomes part of their way of understanding themselves and the world. Religious meaning, as this study understands it, is not completed simply by the formation of experience within the narrative world; rather, it attains one of its most important manifestations when it reshapes the way one looks upon self and other, influencing judgment of actions and positions. But what remains of this meaning after the narrative world is complete? Does its effect end at the boundaries of the text, or does it extend to the reader as well? From this question the second section begins, setting out to trace how religious meaning turns into an experience the reader helps construct through narrative empathy and practical wisdom.

1. Narrative Empathy and the Reshaping of Moral Consciousness

How does religious meaning leave the narrative world to become part of the reader's experience? This is achieved when the reader becomes engaged in an experience that reshapes their view of the characters and their actions. Meaning forms as reading extends, widening as companionship between the reader and the fictional world deepens. This transformation may be among the most powerful effects of the art of the novel, for it allows a person to see the world from within a life they have not lived, and to share with its people their questions, hesitations, and transformations before settling on a position toward them. For, as Martha C. Nussbaum puts it, "there are truths about human life that can only be adequately and precisely expressed in the language and forms created by narrative art." This conception becomes clearer still in the experience of the novel. The reader does not encounter fully formed characters from their first appearance, but accompanies them as they search, hesitate, and reconsider their choices. With every step taken alongside them, the reader's understanding of them changes, and empathy becomes the fruit of gradual knowledge rather than a fleeting emotional response. The reader may retain the character after finishing the novel, because what has become fixed in memory is not merely their positions but the course of their formation. Empathy thus grows with the widening of the reader's knowledge of the motives that drive the character and its transformations. *A Small Death* reveals this movement from its very opening, when Ibn Arabi says: "How much this provision burdens the seeker of seclusion, and how it wastes me away when I keep vigil to witness the risings of the divine lights..." We consider that this statement places the reader before a character still at the beginning of the path; seclusion appears as a daily struggle, and

the quest for knowledge comes intertwined with the hardship of the experience. The novel leaves this beginning open, then returns to it implicitly with every new stage of the journey, until the opening scene becomes fuller of signification. The reader shares with Ibn Arabi his passage from one experience to another, witnesses his reconsiderations, his hesitation, and his gradual discovery of the world. From this course, empathy arises, for it rests on living through the process of formation, not on admiration for a ready-made image.

A different form of empathy arises in *Mawlana*: the reader finds themselves within a world in which successive decisions press upon the character, so that perplexity becomes part of the experience of reception. Sheikh Hatem moves within a space where the religious institution, the media, authority, and the public intersect, and from this contact arise positions requiring continual reconsideration. This perplexity arises not from any ambiguity in the character but from the shifting situations in which he is placed, such that every position reinterprets the positions that preceded it.

Empathy here deepens in a manner different from that in *A Small Death*. Whereas the long journey in the first novel grants the reader ample time to accompany the character, the acceleration of events in *Mawlana* makes empathy the offspring of the moral pressure to which the character is subjected as he is called upon to make decisions in rapid succession. The difference in rhythm between the two novels leads to different paths toward the same result: both novels drive the reader to become more inclined to understand the human being before judging them. At this level the two works meet at a profound point: empathy prepares the reader to acquire another way of looking at human action, making them more inclined to understand it before passing judgment on it. Reading thus becomes a training in patience, and in the recognition that human experience is wider than quick classifications. This aligns with Nussbaum's conception: the novel widens the field of understanding because it places the reader within the experience itself, so that they share with the characters their search for meaning before formulating their judgment of them. From this experience, the transition to the question of practical wisdom becomes possible, as the farthest-reaching effect reading leaves on the reader's consciousness. When does this empathy turn into judgment or insight? At this moment the question becomes as much moral as narrative: the reader does not merely understand the characters but begins to reconsider their own judgments in light of the experience undergone with them. From here, empathy exceeds the bounds of emotional participation to enter the domain of practical estimation, where positions are formed and actions and ends are weighed anew. Here practical wisdom becomes the horizon at which narrative experience arrives, and from which a new stage of understanding begins.

2. Narrative and Practical Wisdom

If empathy opens for the reader the door to drawing near the characters, the effect of reading extends beyond the completion of the novel. Certain positions remain present in memory, returning whenever the reader encounters an experience resembling them in their own life. At this point, reading approaches the meaning of practical wisdom: the experience lived within the narrative world becomes an element participating in the construction of the reader's judgment of events, and in the estimation of what each situation requires by way of a balance among adjacent or conflicting values.

A Small Death reveals this transformation through the long journey Ibn Arabi traverses. The experience the reader takes away is connected to the way a human being is formed while testing the world and reconsidering the self as their experience widens, more than it is connected to Sufism as an object of knowledge. In this Ibn Arabi says: "From the moment God brought me into being in Murcia until He took me in Damascus, I have been on an unceasing journey."

The signification of this statement exceeds a description of the journeys the character undertook, for travel is transformed into an image of the movement of consciousness itself. Every transition opens a new horizon, and every encounter leaves a trace that returns to alter the understanding of what preceded it. Perhaps this is why the reader, at the novel's end, senses that the true journey was not between cities, but within the self as it reconsiders its certainties and rearranges its relationship to the world. From here arises the wisdom the novel leaves behind: it is the fruit of an experience that accumulated slowly and ripened with time, not one generated from a single moment of unveiling or a decisive answer at which the character arrived.

It may be striking that Ibn Arabi grows ever wider in scope as his contact with people, places, and varied experiences increases. The reader therefore leaves the novel more prepared to listen to inner transformations,

and more inclined to believe that a human being cannot be understood through a single position, nor through a single stage of their life. This may be the first wisdom A Small Death grants its reader: a wisdom arising from living through the experience, not from receiving its summary. The reading then moves to a different kind of experience with Mawlana: the novel widens the reader's horizon by placing them within situations where the religious, the social, and the media intersect, such that passing judgment itself becomes part of the experience. Sheikh Hatem does not undertake a long spiritual journey but lives within a reality crowded with competing voices, intersecting frames of reference, and shifting positions from one day to the next. From this constant contact a different experience arises: the novel does not grant its reader the refuge of settled certainty, but invites them to accompany a character who finds himself, at every stage, called upon to reassess the situation in light of new data. Sheikh Hatem's voice may reach us as he says: "He was not concerned with whether a matter was permissible or impermissible alone, but with what it entailed for people's lives." This question appears to represent one of the novel's major turning points, for it shifts the center of gravity from abstract judgment to the effect of action in human reality. At this point, the reader too begins to reconsider their way of looking at events. The matter turns toward understanding the consequences entailed by each choice, the circumstances surrounding it, and the responsibility borne by its agent. Perhaps this is why the reader leaves Mawlana more sensitive to the complexity of moral decision-making, and more aware that a human being may find themselves facing situations contested by considerations that are difficult to reconcile.

It is striking that this effect ultimately converges with what A Small Death produces, despite the difference between the two paths. Ibn Arabi attains wisdom through the extension of the journey and the accumulation of experiences, while Sheikh Hatem attains it through the succession of daily trials and the pressure of reality. Nonetheless, the two works converge on a single outcome: both invite the reader to defer hasty judgments, and to listen to the layers experience conceals that do not appear at first glance. The two novels may differ in subject and in rhythm, yet the experience with which they leave the reader is nearly identical, for it widens the field of understanding before driving the reader to pass judgment. This outcome perhaps explains what Wayne C. Booth argues when he writes: "We choose the company we keep in fiction, and this company contributes to shaping the persons we become."

Booth points to an experience that extends through the time of reading and then continues its effect after it ends. Both novels reveal this clearly: the reader does not leave the company of Ibn Arabi or Sheikh Hatem simply by turning the last page, because what has accompanied them throughout the reading gradually transforms into a way of understanding the human being, of listening to their motives, and of appreciating the complexity surrounding their actions. Here practical wisdom begins to take shape, for it grows from a companionship that has extended over time, one in which both character and reader together have tested multiple facets of human experience. This conception grows clearer still in light of what Ricœur argues when he writes: "...practical wisdom finds no other recourse, within the framework of moral judgment in situation, than to have recourse to the primary intuition of ethics, namely the aim of the 'good life' with and for others, within just institutions." We then hear the narrator of Mawlana telling us of Sheikh Hatem, who "was not concerned with whether a matter was permissible or impermissible alone, but with what it entailed for people's lives." We noted that the importance of this passage lies not merely in Sheikh Hatem's shift from the question of permissibility to the question of consequences, but in the fact that the novel redefines the function of religious judgment within human experience. The criterion guiding the character extends from mere conformity of the act to the rule, to an assessment of its effect on the lives of others and the responsibility it entails. Here narrative exceeds the boundaries of choosing between licit and illicit, driving the reader to test the situation from within, weighing the conflicting values it involves. From this transformation arises what Ricœur calls practical wisdom, since it does not issue from a ready-made rule but arises from assessing the human situation in its complexity. This conception seems to illuminate, from a philosophical angle, what the two novels reveal at the narrative level. Wisdom is not derived from a general rule applied to all events, but is formed in the course of assessing lived situations, where values stand side by side, motives intertwine, and judgment itself becomes part of the experience. From this angle, narrative becomes a laboratory of practical wisdom, for it allows the reader to accompany the characters as they face conditions that do not respond to ready-made solutions, and to test with them multiple possibilities for action before settling on an assessment that seems closest to fairness.

This may be among the deepest effects left by A Small Death and Mawlana. Ibn Arabi does not attain

his spiritual maturity in a sudden moment, but through successive reconsiderations imposed by his journeys, encounters, and experiences of loss, love, and unveiling. Sheikh Hatem, for his part, continues to reconsider his positions each time life places him before a new trial, so his angle of vision shifts as circumstances change. The reader shares in this movement without quite noticing it, likewise rearranging their own judgments as their knowledge of the characters widens, until understanding precedes judgment, and weighing different considerations becomes part of the experience of reading itself. We believe this is the point at which Booth and Ricœur converge: the company of the characters, as Booth describes it, grants the reader a human experience that exceeds the time of reading, while Ricœur reveals that this experience turns into practical wisdom when it enters into the construction of moral judgment in concrete situations. Taking the two conceptions together, it becomes clearer that the novel does not offer a model to be emulated, nor a direct moral lesson, but prepares the reader to acquire a wider capacity for understanding, a finer capacity for weighing, and a closer approach to fairness in assessing human actions. From here the relationship between art, religion, and ethics acquires its meaning in the two novels: religion is present as a human experience lived within time, and art composes this experience within a narrative construction that opens it before the reader for renewed testing. At this horizon the circle the article began is completed, as religious meaning, through narrative, turns into a moral experience that exceeds the boundaries of the text and continues its effect in the understanding of humanity and the world. The final comparison confirms that the difference between the two novels is not limited to the subject of religious experience, but extends to the way its meaning is generated. In *A Small Death* this meaning arises from the temporal extension of the journey and the accumulation of experiences, while in *Mawlana* it is generated from continuous contact with the public sphere. Despite the difference between the two paths, the two novels converge in making narrative the space in which human experience becomes intelligible and open to interpretation.

Conclusion

A reading of *A Small Death* and *Mawlana* reveals that the relationship between art and religion is determined by the way human experience is organized within the narrative construction, more than it is determined by the novel's subject matter itself. The analysis has shown that religious meaning passes through three complementary moments: it begins with the experience lived by the characters, is then reorganized by plot and time, before completing its effect in the act of reading in the form of a moral experience. These levels reveal a framework that explains how narrative produces religious meaning within the novel.

The narratological approach has shown that this meaning continues to form in the experience of reception, moving beyond the boundaries of the text into the reader's experience. As the reader accompanies the characters through their journeys, reconsiderations, and trials, they acquire, over time, a wider capacity to understand human motives, becoming more inclined to suspend initial judgments and to listen to the layers and meanings stored within experience. From here empathy turns into a path of understanding, and practical wisdom becomes an effect generated from living through the narrative experience and from participating in assessing the situations the novel presents.

Perhaps what is most striking is that the difference between the two fictional worlds did not prevent their convergence in this function. *A Small Death* builds its experience through the Sufi journey extended in time, while *Mawlana* makes the character's contact with their social and media reality a field for testing values in changing situations. Despite the difference between these two paths, the two novels converge on a single horizon: abstract meaning recedes in favor of lived experience, and religion becomes part of a human course that forms with action, widens with reconsideration, and remains open to interpretation.

This outcome leads to a redefinition of narrative's position in the study of religion within the novel. Narrative is not limited to representing religious experience but contributes to producing its meaning through composing experience, reorganizing it, and opening it to interpretation. Plot composes scattered experiences into a single construction; time rearranges and reinterprets them; and reading then grants them new life within the reader's consciousness. At this horizon, art, religion, and ethics converge in a single experience, whose substance is a renewed search for understanding the human being, an approach toward the complexity of their actions, and a widening of the horizon for judging them.

These findings lead to a reconsideration of the way religion is studied in the novel. The question turns

toward how narrative produces its religious meaning through organizing human experience, more than toward measuring the density of religious discourse present in the text. Religion, from this perspective, becomes an interpretive horizon that forms with experience, is composed by plot, is reconstructed by time, and is renewed in reception in the form of a moral experience. This framework opens the possibility of reading other novels that differ in subject matter and frames of reference, while retaining the same question: how does narrative produce religious meaning from human experience?

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