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CONTENTS

Volume 1 | Issue III | September 2017

- SUMMA** 1
This essay was awarded MAGNA in the June 2017 issue.
Philosophy and Literary Theory
Re-placing the Semiotic Bar
Brian Glucksman '17
BASIS Scottsdale
Arizona, USA
- Philosophy and Literary Theory* 11
The Gravity of the Narrative:
A Pull in the Orbitals of Fate and Free Will
Shreya Venkatesh '17
BASIS Scottsdale
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SUMMA

Philosophy and Literary Theory

Re-placing the Semiotic Bar

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Ferdinand de Saussure argued that language should be thought of as a system of arbitrary and differential semiotic signs, which were each composed of a signifier (the psychological impression that sensing a sign makes) and a signified (a unit of cognition).¹ Jean Baudrillard critiqued de Saussure's signs by arguing that the semiotic bar, which divided the signifier from the signifieds, could no longer separate the two entities.² The goals of this paper are to examine Baudrillard's critique of the system of signs and to rebut it by re-placing the semiotic bar. Since this is fundamentally a textual question, I will facilitate the process by considering "The Call of Cthulhu" by H.P. Lovecraft.³

In the story, the ancient city of R'yleh, which is home to a race of extraterrestrials called the Great Old Ones, had been submerged for millennia, causing the powerful inhabitants to lay perpetually dormant. However, lore, and possibly telepathy, had motivated a cult of believers to try to free sleeping Cthulhu, the priest of R'yleh, from the underwater city.

A boatful of cultists set out in a yacht to find R'yleh, but their voyage was cut short when they attacked a schooner and the schooner's crew annihilated the cultists. A recent earthquake, however, had exposed

¹ F. de Saussure, 'Nature of the Linguistic Sign', in ed. C. Bally and A. Sechehaye, trans. W. Baskin, *Course in General Linguistics*, New York, McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1966, pp. 65–70.

² Baudrillard, J., *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. S. Glasser, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1997.

³ I chose to examine "The Call of Cthulhu" because the style and content of the story mirror the confusion and wildness of a post-structural mindset.

some of the pillars of R'yleh to the schooner's crew, and they decided to explore. In the process, they opened a gate, and Cthulhu escaped. At the sight of the monster, several crewmembers died, but two men, Johansen, and a crewmate, were able to retreat to the boat. Cthulhu pursued the fleeing sailors with great speed, so they turned around and rammed their ship through Cthulhu. Cthulhu burst, but he began to reform. The sailors escaped; Johansen made it all the way back to his home in Norway, where a collision with a man dressed as a sailor caused the Norwegian to collapse and die without a medical cause.

While this is happening, on the opposite side of the globe, the artist Wilcox dreamed of Cthulhu and, in a frenzy, brought a bas-relief depicting his dream to Professor Angell, an expert in ancient scripts. Angell, having previously seen a different statue of Cthulhu and having heard about the cult, began investigating, which led him to correlate Wilcox's delirium with several societal and environmental disturbances. Angell, however, also ran into a man dressed as a sailor and died in a similarly mysterious fashion. After Angell's death, the narrator, Thurston, found Angell's notes, prompting him to look into the matter. He discovered Johansen's story, which he relayed to the reader. At some unknown time, Thurston dies too without a known cause.

Clearly, at the center of the story is the motif of collapse: Angell and Johansen fall; Cthulhu bursts; the whole story is collapsed onto paper. Several critics have advocated that Lovecraft is attempting to depict the unimaginable by highlighting the shortfalls of language and narrative.^{4,5} Other theorists have argued that the motif of collapse is an assault on the very notion of subjectivity.^{6,7}

What all these explanations fail to account for is that the collapse in the story is generative. The deaths of Angell and Johansen lead to new discoveries. The collapse of Cthulhu leads to the reincarnation of Cthulhu. The very idea of destruction is put into question by the way the story is told, which is in a contra-temporal order and within a series of frames. Everything, including death and destruction, is recycled within

⁴ K. Matolcsy, 'The Monster-Text: Analogy and Metaphor in Lovecraft', *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies*, vol. 18, no. 1/2, 2012, pp. 151-159.

⁵ C. Sederholm, 'What Screams are Made Of: Representing Cosmic Fear in H.P. Lovecraft's "Pickman's Model"', *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, vol. 16, no. 4, 2006, pp. 335-349.

⁶ C. Carrolles, 'H.P. Lovecraft's The Call of Cthulhu: an Intermedial Analysis of Its Graphic Adaptation'. *Journal of Artistic Creation and Literary Research*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2013, pp. 1-15.

⁷ G. Harman, 'On the Horror of Phenomenology: Lovecraft and Husserl', *Collapse: Philosophical Research and Development*, vol. 4, 2010, pp. 3-34.

other frames. Moreover, the frames do not even have a clear end because the first line of the short story creates a frame that seems to extend beyond the text, “(Found Among the Papers of the Late Francis Wayland Thurston, of Boston).”⁸ It seems less and less like H.P. Lovecraft was writing about collapse as much as he was collapsing the idea of the collapse itself. In the story, Lovecraft also literally conveys this intention with a couplet, “That is not dead which can eternal lie, / And with strange aeons even death may die.”⁹

Within that couplet, the word “lie” appears to be paronomastic in its use. Throughout the story, the motifs of sleep and deception are closely related. Thurston is unable to sleep because he believes reality is illusory, “I shall never sleep calmly again when I think of the horrors that lurk ceaselessly behind life in time and in space.”¹⁰ Moreover, the ideas of death, another interpretation of “eternal lie,” and deceit are also closely tied. The narrator theorized about some “secret methods and poison needles” used to kill his uncle.¹¹ The existence of Cthulhu, the incarnation of death, was described as invoking “eldritch contradictions of all matter, force, and cosmic order.”¹²

Implicit within all these descriptions is the idea of a hidden and disturbing reality being exposed, making everything the characters have known illusory. However, the analogy that Lovecraft used to open the story implies not that what have known is less real than the Great Old Ones, but that the Great Old Ones are simply unknown:

We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far. The sciences, each straining in its own direction, have hitherto harmed us little; but some day the piecing together of dissociated knowledge will open up such terrifying vistas of reality, and of our frightful position therein, that we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the deadly light into the peace and safety of a new dark age.¹³

How is it possible to reconcile the idea that reality is hidden, but that the hidden reality is no more real than its veil? The duplication and twisting of reality implied by this question were central to the ideas of Jean Baudrillard in *Simulacra and Simulation*. At its core, Baudrillard’s book was

⁸ H. Lovecraft, ‘The Call of Cthulhu’, in S. Joshi (ed.), *The Call of Cthulhu and Other Weird Stories*, New York, Penguin Books, 1999, p. 139.

⁹ Lovecraft, p. 156.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 164.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 159.

¹² *Ibid.*, 167.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 139.

responding to the idea of signification, that a semiotic sign could stand in for a referent. Rather than thinking that the sign of an apple referred to an apple, he believed the sign of an apple pointed only to other signs, doubles which were all equally unreal. With regards to the Great Old Ones, this would mean that Cthulhu was no more real than its banal shroud, and it is the realization of this doubling that makes the character so terrified in “The Call of Cthulhu.” Baudrillard’s explanation works well at explaining the thoughts of Lovecraft, but why would Baudrillard believe this?

The starting point for his work was the semiotic sign, which is made up of two inextricably linked psychological parts, the signifier and the signified. The signifier, the mental state caused by hearing a word or seeing a sign, recalls the signified, the currency of thought. Baudrillard thought that this distinction was problematized by simulation, which he defines as “to feign to have what one doesn’t have.”¹⁴ A simulator makes a false claim to have access to reality when that is no longer possible. Baudrillard found a good example in a family he saw on TV, the Louds, whose lives were broadcast for a reality show. Baudrillard’s primary criticism of the Louds’ show was with the premise and the slogan of the show:

“They lived as if we were not there.” An absurd, paradoxical formula-neither true nor false: utopian. The “as if we were not there” is equal to “as if you were there.” [... it is] the pleasure of an excess of meaning, when the bar of the sign falls below the usual waterline of meaning: the nonsignifier is exalted by the camera angle. There one sees what the real never was (but “as if you were there”), without the distance that gives us perspectival space and depth vision (but “more real than nature”).¹⁵

Baudrillard believes that the Louds’ show lowered the semiotic bar to the point that much if not all of what was signifier had become signified because the Louds’ producers claimed to give you the signified (seeing the family’s life) while removing the act of signification (changing reality by watching). Without the act of signification, one no longer must perceive a sign to get the meaning. Instead, everything has collapsed to the point that the signified is already inside their head. Under de Saussure’s model, when we look at the screens of our televisions, the image is a signifier, which is exchanged, within our head, for the signified. The success of this exchange relies on a distance between the interpreting part of our minds and our television screens. Baudrillard was arguing that we have, however, lost this distance, so everything that is

¹⁴ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 3.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 28.

experienced or thought is composed of pure signifiers. Due to this removal of the act of signification, everything collapses into the viewer and into what is outside the viewer.

By a Baudrillardian account, the story consists of everything collapsing into something real, but more real than nature. The real Angell must die to be replaced by Angell's unfiltered thoughts written on paper. The same thing applies to Johansen. Even Cthulhu must be replaced by a more real Cthulhu. A strength of this interpretation is how well it can explain the strange introductory note, "(Found Among the Papers of the Late Francis Wayland Thurston, of Boston)"¹⁶ because the whole story must be collapsed to make it more real than if the reader just randomly picked up some madman's ravings.

The issue with Baudrillard's ideas is not textual, but practical. Baudrillard thought that simulation batted the possibility for there to be substantive political change:

This anticipation, this precession, this short circuit, this confusion of the fact with its model (no more divergence of meaning, no more dialectical polarity, no more negative electricity, implosion of antagonistic poles), is what allows each time for all possible interpretations, even the most contradictory – all true, in the sense that their truth is to be exchanged, in the image of the models from which they derive, in a generalized cycle.¹⁷

Baudrillard argued that the result of the simulation was that any ideological explanation of the world was able to account for any event, causing it to be impossible to look beyond the current ideology and make the world better. Therefore, it is important not just to accept simulation because it is successful at explaining "The Call of Cthulhu," but to try to restore signification.

If we accept Baudrillard's argument that the semiotic bar can no longer successfully divide a psychological signifier from a psychological signified, then it is important to look elsewhere for a signifier and a signified. The signifier and signified are inextricably linked but are entirely distinct. I propose that to restore signification, the best move is to look toward binary themes in the story. Specifically, I think we should consider the broad and opposing themes of the Self, that which is known, and the Other, that which cannot be known.¹⁸

¹⁶ Lovecraft, "The Call of Cthulhu", p. 139.

¹⁷ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 17.

¹⁸ Themes like Self and Other are capitalized to distinguish them from semiotic signifiers.

It cannot simply work to say that the Self is the signifier and the Other is the signified because the signifier and signified must be two parts of a whole, not opposites. For this reason, I propose that the signifier be the Self and the Other and the signified be neither the Self nor the Other. Obviously, the semiotic bar between these two terms cannot be lost because they are logically necessarily distinct. Additionally, the signifier and the signified are linked together because they form a whole continuum; the Self and the Other are defined against a baseline of being unknown and the converse is obviously true.

Therefore, we have reproduced the signifier and signified relationship with regard to some themes. Nevertheless, if we have truly reinvigorated signification and re-placed the semiotic bar, then the sign that we have identified must have a referent. In other words, the movement between the Self and the Other and the not Self and the not Other must refer to something in the story. Under de Saussure's system of signs, each semiotic sign had multiple referents; the word scarf refers to many scarfs. Therefore, the thematic sign that we have identified likely also has many referents, so the most prudent thing to do seems to once again choose a vague and relevant theme such as Death.

By this understanding, we have produced a signifier and a signified that necessarily cannot be collapsed into each other. However, it is possible to move between them, and that motion would necessarily have to route through Death, so to the extent that Death is signaled by the movement between the signified and the signifier, Death makes sense as a referent. It seems like we have made the kind of sign that should be able to stand up to simulation necessarily.

So, what does this mean for our analysis of "The Call of Cthulhu?" How can we reclaim it using the new conception of the sign? We have already created a semiotic chain as a basis for the sign, but the terms of that sign turned out to be generic. I propose now that we consider the sign in relation to the story. It seems to me the next move to take is to return to the text for some of the literal deaths of the story and to consider how well our ideas of Death work at describing these deaths. We have already shown that the sign that we have constructed can operate without collapsing, but we need to what relationship it bears to the story:

Let us first consider the death of Professor Angell, which sets the whole plot in motion:

My knowledge of the thing began in the winter of 1926–27 with the death of [...] Angell. Professor Angell was widely known [...] The professor had been [...] falling suddenly

[...] after having been jostled by a nautical-looking negro [...] Physicians were unable to find any visible disorder, but concluded after perplexed debate that some obscure lesion of the heart, induced by the brisk ascent of so steep a hill by so elderly a man, was responsible for the end. At the time I saw no reason to dissent from this dictum, but latterly I am inclined to wonder – and more than wonder.¹⁹

By the accounts of the thematic sign, Death occurs as the collapse of the Self into the Other or vice versa begins to swing in the opposite direction. This seems like a paradigmatic shift from the living Self to the dead Other with his literal collapse marking his transition between the two. By this understanding, he Died twice; his first Death occurred upon contact with the sailor when he transitioned from the static point of a famous professor to neither Other nor Self. His second Death occurred upon his movement from being neither the Other nor the Self that his collapse brought to being a pure Other that his inexplicable death brought. It is worth noting that if he is ever Other, he is also Self. When he is famous and living, he holds the secret of his knowledge of Cthulhu, which makes him Other. When he is made Other by his death of an unknown cause, he is brought into the Self by the flexibility of medicine to explain the unexplainable. A similar explanation applies to the death of the sailor Johansen, who also held the secret of Cthulhu and was killed by a sailor.

Cthulhu's death presents an even more interesting case than Angell's:

There was a bursting as of an exploding bladder ... and then there was only a venomous seething astern; where [...] the scattered plasticity of that nameless sky-spawn was nebulously recombining in its hateful original form.²⁰

Cthulhu holds the position of the Other for the story until his death, which is brought about by the movement to a new position in which it is neither known nor unknown. It is Other because Cthulhu could never be understood, but it is given familiarity by the fact that he returns to the same form as before as if there is something set and understandable about his body. Its death matches its Death.

Let us consider the parenthetical note at the beginning of the first page of the story, "(Found Among the Papers of the Late Francis Wayland Thurston, of Boston)."²¹ Obviously, this note states that

¹⁹ Lovecraft, p. 139.

²⁰ Ibid., 168.

²¹ Ibid., 139.

Thurston had died, but it did more than that. Stories have a weird role; it seems like whenever a text is thought of as a text it must hold the position of neither the Other nor the Self. A text is Other otherwise there is no point in reading because anything that can be gained from reading could be gained much more successfully through experiencing. Reading, at best, would be a lesser sort of experience. Meanwhile, the reader has direct access to what is read. The processing of reading occurs inside of the reader; what is read can be accessed like a thought or an experience. The parenthetical note that begins the story moves the story from the weird spot of not Other and not Self to pure Otherness as it becomes framed. It is someone else's story and as such, it can never be known to us. Even if we found the manuscript on an old table in Rhode Island and not among fiction pieces, it would be impossible to verify its truth as it has become permanently unknown. With the move to Otherness, we start an oscillation between Self, Other, and neither, which results in several Deaths and deaths within the story.

Now that we have taken some time to think about specific Deaths and deaths in the story, let us take a second to consider what Baudrillard wrote about Death for comparison to our results for Angell. This seems like a worthwhile task as it tells us how true our interpretation has been to Baudrillard's theory is. If we find that we are wildly deviating from what he wrote in our conclusion, either we made a mistake or he did. Baudrillard describes the hyperreal system in terms of death:

It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real, that is to say of an operation of deterring every real process via its operational double, a programmatic, metastable, perfectly descriptive machine that offers all the signs of the real and short circuits all its vicissitudes. Never again will the real have the chance to produce itself - such is the vital function of the model in a system of death, or rather of anticipated resurrection, that no longer even gives the event of death a chance.²²

Baudrillard here is positing that in the hyperreal system, it is required that an object dies to be resurrected. The real can no longer be left to exist because it must be collapsed and replaced as a sacrifice to prevent the whole collapse of the simulated system. In fact, this deletion is the kind of thing that our symbol of death can provide an elucidating explanation for. Nothing Other than myself (or even inside myself) can exist as a real object unknown by the hyperreal system, which must contain everything. Even my own existence as a Self is caught in the

²² Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 140.

crossfire and killed by the collapse of perspectival space. Everything is shifted to a new space, where the Other and the Self do not make sense. This move marks the Death of the real.

In trying to make a sign for Death to reinvigorate Death, we might have forgotten that we have made a sign for Death. Let us conclude by considering exactly what we have found about Death. There are two positions, Other of Self, that a position can (or cannot) occupy. Holding any position puts her or him on the brink of Death. Backing away from the brink, crossing the semiotic bar is exactly what causes Death. In other words, the repulsion of Death is attractive.

Alternatively, a person could be not holding any position. Death comes to him or her as soon as s/he lands on any position. For him or her, Death is the act of lowering, of grounding. The attractions of stasis, which are what drew us to our project of rethinking the semiotic bar, are a drive toward Death. Staying up in the top half of the sign is the Baudrillardian strategy. It is successful at avoiding Death, but it has all the problems of infinite spiraling that we talked about earlier. If we started with a Baudrillardian reading, we would be stuck with the Baudrillardian problem, and deviation would be punished by Death. However, we started with a structuralist outlook, and as such, we are stuck on the bottom of the sign, standing at the edge of Death. This seems to be the only place to stand as we have cleared a space to operate without Death or the spiraling of a positionless reading.

The implications of re-placing the semiotic go well beyond attaining a deeper understanding of Lovecraft's work. First, I have addressed Baudrillard's argument that substantive political change is no longer possible by opening a space away from simulation by restoring signification. Second, restoring the semiotic bar has opened the possibility for a system of signs to once again be a viable model for meaning. An exploration of thematic signs as a semiotic system could potentially yield some interesting results.

The goal of this paper was to re-place the semiotic bar in "The Call of Cthulhu" to rebut Jean Baudrillard's critique of signs. We did this by reimagining the signifier and signified as logical permutations of themes rather than psychological entities. In doing this, we have found a model for signs that necessarily stand up to Baudrillard's criticism.

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The Gravity of the Narrative: A Pull in the Orbitals of Fate and Free Will

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Abstract

Understanding the limits of what is real and what is not is a difficult conundrum. In literature, we often use themes and plot points in a fictional novel to describe human nature and interactions. Yet, at the same time, we acknowledge that the narrative within the novel is fictitious. How can a novel be both real and imaginary all at once? In an attempt to explore the limits of reality, this paper examines how the binary of fate and free will unravels itself through the *Harry Potter* novels. Based on how fate and free will interact in the worlds of what we consider the literary and the real, we can attempt to construct a model demonstrating how these various forces behave at any particular moment. With the help of such a model, we can then draw conclusions on the relationship between fate and free will, the implications of which will help cast light on the struggle between the literary and the real.

The Narrative and Its Many Problems

What is the *real*? The relationship between the literary and the real remains a subject of confusion woven into any journey through literature. How can we speak of a fictional character, an object with no humanity, as though it is a human being? And how can we draw conclusions about human nature based on the themes and plot lines of such a character's story?

In this apparent mistaking of the literary for the real, writers parallel the narrative of a fictional book with the narrative of human life.

It seems problematic that in viewing human life as a narrative, we set a plot point within a work of fiction equal to a life point. After all, the literary is not the same as the real – or is it?

What characterizes this slippage between the literary and the real? And what does it say about human interpretations of the narrative – fictional and otherwise? To make sense of this struggle, we can deconstruct a binary that will help us unravel and understand our conception of what is “real” and what is “imaginary”.

An apt binary for this project is that of fate and free will. Fate and free will can easily insert themselves into discussions of the limits of reality; often, this duality is examined through a theological reading. These readings usually debate the existence of a divine power governing both fate and free will, while pushing the literary versus real struggle, however prominent, into the sidelines. Instead, here we will build a model of the interactions between fate and free will in the dimensions of the literary and the real. In this way, we can see what conclusions we can draw about the relationships between the forces of fate and free will and the worlds of the literary and the real.

To begin tackling our discussion of fate and free will, we can pose ourselves an initial question: what is a choice? Besides being taken for granted, choice – when considered alongside the possible existence of fate – is difficult to define. A dictionary definition is “an act of selecting or making a decision when faced with two or more possibilities”.¹ But is it that simple? Can choice be so powerful, so singular, that it gives individuals the ability to make decisions for themselves? How can we be sure that a choice is one’s own? How does the concept of fate interact with choice, if it does at all? Does a definition exist for choice, or, for that matter, fate?

To answer these questions, we can look no further than the *Harry Potter* series. A series of fantasy novels written by J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter* chronicles the life of a blossoming wizard destined to attend Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. An orphaned boy living in Surrey with his abrasive aunt and uncle, Harry is the savior of the wizarding world at only a year old – Lord Voldemort, the main villain of the series, attempted to kill him after a prophecy declared that the boy would be his downfall.² Instead, Harry’s mother stepped in front of him, her love protecting him and banishing Voldemort to a weaker form.³

¹ ‘choice’, *Oxford Dictionary of Current English*, 4th edn., Oxford University Press, 2006.

² J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*, New York, Scholastic, 1997, pp. 8-9.

³ Rowling, *Deathly Hallows*, p. 686.

The series goes on to depict Harry's life as he attends Hogwarts, faced with numerous challenges and adventures. During his time in the wizarding world, Harry learns more about Voldemort and his dark past. With the help of his headmaster, Albus Dumbledore, Harry uncovers a way to defeat Voldemort⁴ and journeys on a mission with his two friends, Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger, to weaken and defeat him.⁵ The series then culminates in a final battle in which Harry defeats Voldemort and restores order and harmony to the wizarding world.⁶

Besides being something of a rite of passage, the *Harry Potter* novels deal largely with the tension between fate and free will. Specifically, the theme of choice in the *Harry Potter* novels inadvertently unravels, breaking the series' supposed unity and collapsing under the struggle between the literary and the real.

The Elusive Choice-Fate Dynamic

It is almost immediately apparent when reading the novels that choice lies at the epicenter of all conflicts and events in the *Harry Potter* world. Rowling herself, while acknowledging that fate is an element of this world, ultimately expresses that choice is what determines that fate, saying, "Destiny is a name often given in retrospect to choices that had dramatic consequences".⁷ Choices made within the narrative of the *Harry Potter* novels do indeed have dramatic consequences; however, it is equally true that fate plays a role in the novels as well, no matter how insignificant or otherwise. How then do fate and free will work in the narrative of *Harry Potter*?

Considering the relationship between fate and free will as a binary is itself immediately problematic. The nature of the binary suggests that there exists a Self and an Other, often written as, for instance, "fate v. free will". But establishing one side of the binary as the Self grants power to that one side, treating it as absolute, while implying the other side of the binary is its opposite. As we will see, this simplistic, neatly divided duality is not the case in the *Harry Potter* novels.

If we consider the narrative of *Harry Potter*, we see that fate and choice have a slippery relationship throughout the story. Anyone who

⁴ Rowling, *Half-Blood Prince*, p. 197-198.

⁵ J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, New York, Scholastic, 2007, pp. 87-89.

⁶ Rowling, p. 608.

⁷ J.K. Rowling, 'A Quote By J.K. Rowling', *Goodreads*, <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/110348-destiny-is-a-name-often-given-in-retrospect-to-choices>, 2008, (accessed 12 December 2016).

has read the *Harry Potter* novels will recognize the phrase “Your choices define you”. This phrase reveals the predominant theme of the entire series: the idea that choice is separate from ability and family history, that what people *can* do is irrelevant – only what they *choose* to do defines them. Yet, Harry and Voldemort, the main characters of the series, appear to have had little choice in defining themselves.

In the story, both characters were brought up around people who abused them, one in an orphanage and one in a relative’s home that might as well have been his orphanage. Yet, despite the similarities in their situations, Harry and Voldemort become vastly different people. Even though Voldemort’s soul latched itself onto one-year-old Harry, Harry still grew up to be a morally sound character. How can this be? We as readers never see Harry or Voldemort in their childhoods, so we can only assume that they chose to do different things early on to become such different people. If so, what made them choose such different paths? Was it fate that created a monster out of Voldemort and a hero out of Harry?

Again, we see that the interactions between fate and free will in the *Harry Potter* world become unclear and confusing as we look closer at their behaviors in the story. It seems that there exists a complex, ever-evolving interaction between the forces of fate and free will, not reaching a balance but not quite reaching a division either. Still, how exactly does this cyclic interaction between fate and choice play out in the realm of *Harry Potter*?

Looking once again at the novel as a narrative, the most obvious instance of fate lies with the prophecy. A prophecy is defined as a prediction of what will surely happen in the future. In the narrative, Professor Trelawney’s two prophecies at first seem to be declarations of inescapable fate, of the triumph of fate over free will. After all, if prophecies exist, how can free will?

Voldemort hears of Trelawney’s first prophecy and immediately sets about making choices to change his fate. However, despite all the effort he takes to guarantee that he will not be defeated, Voldemort ends up marking Harry as his enemy, the savior of the wizarding world. The first prophecy states:

*THE ONE WITH THE POWER TO VANQUISH THE
DARK LORD APPROACHES. . . . BORN TO THOSE
WHO HAVE THRICE DEFIED HIM, BORN AS THE
SEVENTH MONTH DIES . . . AND THE DARK
LORD WILL MARK HIM AS HIS EQUAL, BUT HE*

*WILL HAVE POWER THE DARK LORD KNOWS
NOT . . . AND EITHER MUST DIE AT THE HAND
OF THE OTHER FOR NEITHER CAN LIVE WHILE
THE OTHER SURVIVES. . .*⁸

This comes true as soon as Voldemort recognizes it as a threat and makes Harry the (quite ironically) “Chosen One”, inadvertently fulfilling the prophecy. As Dumbledore notes later on in the novel,

He [Voldemort] chose the boy he thought most likely to be a danger to him . . . and in marking you with that scar, he did not kill you . . . but gave you powers, and a future, which have fitted you to escape him . . . four times so far.⁹

Though Voldemort believes that he has made a choice, he is instead duped by the prophecy, by fate itself, and thus succumbs to fate.

In accordance with this complex relationship between fate and free will, all of the fate seems veiled by choice, by an *apparent* ability for the characters to make decisions. Yet, we still cannot say that fate triumphs over free will or vice versa. Voldemort, in this example, still makes decisions, but the choices he makes all nevertheless end in the same fate.

Thus, the relationship between free will and fate seems somewhat clearer now: choice is shadowed by fate and fate is shadowed by choice such that one never exists without the other’s absent presence. This idea of an absent presence resonates strongly with Jacques Derrida’s conception of deconstructionist trace, the idea that there exists a non-meaning that inevitably haunts any meaning.¹⁰ Hence, in this way, every instance of fate is marked by the trace of choice, and every choice is marked by the trace of fate. One cannot exist without the other although the two forces continually battle with each other. Even the title of “Chosen One” implies that the title is chosen for, not chosen by. That title gives Harry the ability to make choices as a savior would, further problematizing the issue of fate and choice. But what chooses for?

Amidst this battle between fate and free will, it is as interesting to consider the outcome of the battle as it is to consider the battle itself. What determines whether an action is the result of the trace of fate or the trace of choice? Is there an authority that decides whether something falls under the power of fate as opposed to free will or vice versa in the

⁸ J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, New York, Scholastic, 2003, p. 841.

⁹ Rowling, p. 842.

¹⁰ Jaques Derrida, ‘Différance’, *Théorie D’ensemble*, Editions Seuil, 1968, pp. 264-265.

Harry Potter narrative? And if we accept that fate (or, similarly, free will) sways the events in the novels, who or what presides over this function?

Authority's Gravitational Pull

If we regard the novels as a text, we can agree that Rowling is a chief authority presiding over the novels, and consequently, the characters. Since Rowling wrote the novels, it is evident that the events in the books are under her control. Yet, as Derrida explains in his essay, "Signature Event Context", once writers have done their part in writing their works, the words and sentences, and events of those works are out of the author's control.¹¹ This would mean that apart from the obvious, there must be a different authority within the narrative of *Harry Potter* governing the novels once Rowling's presence is absent to the reader.

Taking up the example of the prophecy once more, the centaurs in the narrative possess the ability to "see" the future.¹² In that case, who or what directs the interpretations and consequences of any magical "seeing" in this universe? Julia Pond poses just that question, asking, "[I]s divination a true and reliable art? Where does this magic originate, and who provides the answers to the wizards' questions?"¹³ The gift of the "inner eye", as Trelawney calls it, is itself a mystery. Only select characters have access to this means of divining the fate of the wizarding race, but how these Seers are chosen and who or what chooses them is a matter left unconsidered in the narrative.

Bearing this in mind, Pond "explores the possibility of an authority directing fate" and its interactions with the narrative's concept of an afterlife.¹⁴ Explaining her confusion with the text, Pond writes:

Rowling offers readers a single glimpse into a physical afterlife in Harry's brief conversation with Dumbledore... But even here Dumbledore evades Harry's questions, leaving Harry and his readers still uncertain as to the characteristics of an afterlife or the authority reigning over these two worlds.¹⁵

Based upon Pond's assertion and the examples seen so far, it is still unclear whether an authority even exists or whether events randomly fall

¹¹ Jaques Derrida, 'Signature Event Context', Limited Inc, Northwestern University Press, 1988, pp. 19-21.

¹² Rowling, J.K., *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, New York, Scholastic, 2003, p. 602.

¹³ Julia Rose Pond, 'Divine Destiny or Free Choice: Nietzsche's Strong Wills in the Harry Potter Series', Master's Thesis, Georgia State University, 2008, p. 42.

¹⁴ Pond, p. i.

¹⁵ Pond, p. 45.

under the shadows of fate or free will. If an authority does not exist, is free will the victor? Pond decides to leave it up to the reader, saying:

However, it remains infelicitous [*sic*] that, by choosing not to provide readers and characters with undeniable divine authority, Rowling creates a gap between fate's control and the power behind this control. Readers must decide whether they believe this power necessary for their personal interpretations.¹⁶

Though she fails to resolve the play between fate, choice, and authority, Pond does chip away at an interesting question: does the existence, and if so, power, of authority depends upon the reader? Simply if the reader chooses to believe an authority does or does not exist, does that make it so?

If we remove ourselves from the narrative and regard the novels as texts, we can acknowledge that the *Harry Potter* universe is carefully constructed by its author, the presiding authority over the texts. The iteration of the *Harry Potter* world in what we would regard as the real world is one in which the fictional is depicted in the real, creating a problematic situation where the role of the reader is much more significant than is expected. Because this situation creates friction by bringing the literary and the real closer together, the ideas of authority, fate, and free will all interact in an increasingly complex manner.

The iterability of the stories in the *Harry Potter* novels allows each reader to experience the text regardless of the presence of the author.¹⁷ Hence, though Rowling writes the novels and controls the plot, the way the narrative of the *Harry Potter* novels plays itself out is independent of her writing. Instead, the readers, through the iterability of the novels, regard the narrative in such a way that they understand the plot Rowling has arranged while the interpretation of the narrative remains within their control. This directs us toward the authority of the reader itself. If we accept that the reader can establish or exclude an authority in the novels, what grants the reader this authority? Does the author issue this authority to his or her readers?

And what of this interpretation? Suppose the reader chooses not to accept the dynamic between fate and free will illustrated in this essay – does that discredit the complex relationship outlined here?

¹⁶ Julia Rose Pond, 'Divine Destiny or Free Choice: Nietzsche's Strong Wills in the Harry Potter Series', Master's Thesis, Georgia State University, 2008, p. 48.

¹⁷ Jaques Derrida, 'Signature Event Context', Limited Inc, Northwestern University Press, 1988, pp. 19-21.

The readers choosing to reject this interaction will fall prey to the interaction themselves; rejecting this relationship means accepting that fate and free will represent either a duality or a sameness. In the case of duality, the reader decides to accept that fate and free will are always at odds, a case which unravels when considering the example of the prophecy. How is it that prophecies can never fulfill themselves unless a character chooses them to if fate and choice are absolutely separate? In the case of sameness, the reader decides to equate the fate that the author creates with the choices that characters make, a case which also clearly falls back on itself. How can there exist a signification of choice separate from a signification of fate in the novels if choice and fate are the same? Understanding this hodgepodge of possibilities brings us closer to answering our questions about authority.

There are multiple ways to venture through this matter, but one route is that which argues that the “giving up” of authority defines authority. In writing about the nature of a signature, Derrida discusses how a written signature implies both the presence and absence of the signer, proclaiming,

In order to function, that is, to be readable, a signature must have a repeatable, iterable, imitable form; it must be able to be detached from the present and singular intention of its production. It is its sameness which, by corrupting its identity and its singularity, divides its seal.¹⁸

If we expand upon Derrida’s example of the signature, we can see that a written signature often stands for the authority of the signer and for the signer’s willing partition with some of his or her authority.

For instance, in the *Harry Potter* narrative, the concept of Horcruxes emulates the deconstructionist nature of a signature as Derrida describes it. Here, the soul represents an individual’s sense of self, separate but contained within the material body. The soul is meant to remain untouched and uncorrupted; any division or corruption is a violation of the laws of nature. Yet, Voldemort disregarded this and ventured to create Horcruxes.

Horcruxes are objects in which dark wizards or witches hide a fragment of their soul; the creators of Horcruxes are considered immortal so long as the objects that contain the soul fragments remain unharmed. In the sixth book, Professor Horace Slughorn explains this process more clearly: “Well, you split your soul, you see...and hide part of it in an object outside the body. Then, even if one’s body is attacked

¹⁸ Jaques Derrida, ‘Signature Event Context’, Limited Inc, Northwestern University Press, 1988, p. 20.

or destroyed, one cannot die, for part of the soul remains earthbound and undamaged”.¹⁹

Though the soul is ripped from the body, the fragmented part of the soul that lives as a Horcrux retains the identity and consciousness of its creator and can even latch onto another’s soul. In the sixth novel, Dumbledore explains how Horcruxes can be used to inhabit a living being: “[Voldemort’s] diary [one of his Horcruxes] had been intended as a weapon as much as a safeguard...there could be no doubt that Riddle [Voldemort] really wanted that diary read, wanted the piece of his soul to inhabit or possess somebody else”.²⁰

One of Voldemort’s main goals was always to achieve immortality. Yet, it is interesting to note that to gain control of his mortality, Voldemort had to give up a part of his humanity by ripping apart his very soul. Voldemort’s soul essentially becomes detached from the intention of its production. The soul in the narrative is meant to be the means of passage between life and the afterlife. Additionally, it serves as a sort of moral monitor; a clean, immaculate soul represents the morally sound, while an unstable, fragmented one reveals unthinkable evils.

Furthermore, the iterability of the soul lies in its production. The soul must be iterable to exist in various forms even without the presence of the body. For instance, the soul can take the form of either a living human being, a ghost, or a spirit passing on to the afterlife. However, Voldemort used his soul instead as an instrument in his quest for immortality. To achieve “full” authority over his own life, Voldemort had to give up fragments of his mortality and humanity.

If we regard our initial question once again (what determines whether an action in the narrative is a result of the trace of fate or the trace of free will?), we can see that authority is the center around which fate and free will orbit. It is that presumed fixed point that anchors the two sides of this duality together, creating the impression that there exists a neat dimensionality to the literary and the real. In this model, fate and free will occupy a position on rings, or orbitals, revolving around authority, placed at the presumed center of the two rings. As we have seen in the *Harry Potter* narrative so far, this system would portray fate and free will such that their proximities to the center (to the authority)

¹⁹ J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, New York, Scholastic, 2005, p. 497.

²⁰ J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, New York, Scholastic, 2005, p. 501.

result in the complex relationship between the two forces which we have observed so far.

In other words, the specific coordinate positions of fate and free will along their respective orbitals, when paired with their distance from the center, would produce the fate-choice dynamic we have observed thus far. As Derrida explains,

Freeplay is the disruption of presence...Freeplay is always an interplay of absence and presence...conceived of before the alternative of presence and absence; being must be conceived of as presence or absence beginning with the possibility of freeplay and not the other way around.²¹

Hence, this would suggest an infinite play²² of these forces' positions along the orbitals and an infinite array of distances between the center and the forces of fate and free will. Furthermore, if we regard the distance from the center to these forces as representative of knowledge, we can see that exactly how much we know about the interactions between and individual activities of fate, free will, and authority varies as the two forces travel along their orbitals. The larger the distance, the less we are privy to the intricacies of the fate-choice dynamic coupled with the authority's influence over it.

Hence, through our examination of these forces, we can see that through the freeplay of fate and free will, this center is the most alienated of all the elements in this "structure". We then have an interesting cyclic interaction between these forces in which the freeplay between fate and free will creates this decentered authority, while that non-center, in turn, allows for the freeplay of the forces of fate and free will. The decentralized nature of authority supported by the model outlined here shows how this interplay between fate and free will cannot provide us with a fixed answer about the nature of authority in the novels.

As we have seen, the figure of authority in the *Harry Potter* narrative is a prime element driving the interactions between fate and free will. When the authority on its own is so complex in nature, involving a voluntary or involuntary "giving up" of authority to gain authority, interacting with fate and free will before we have even approached it in terms of that duality, it is easy to see that fate and choice do not merely reach either a balance or a division.

²¹ Jacques Derrida, 'Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences', *Writing and Difference*, Routledge, 1978, p. 294.

²² Derrida, p. 279.

What Now?

The complex relationships between binaries that we have explored so far leave every motion of the literary and the real worlds unpredictable and, sometimes, inexplicable. An analogy between the literary and the real is pointless because they work in such complex ways, battling against each other both similarly and distinctly. At the same time, trying to prove that such an analogy is pointless only creates more obstacles, empowering the analogy. As Derrida argued, attempting to disprove the concept of metaphor gives power to the concept – attempting to destroy something only reaffirms its power.²³

In deconstructing these binaries, we can suspend their unraveling in a single moment and attempt to make sense of them. Here, for instance, we can see that in using the narrative as a parallel with the real world, as an iteration of the fictional in the real, we can regard Harry as a person and examine the themes of the novels in such a moment. Similarly, we can draw parallels between the way fate and free will operate in the real and fictional worlds.

However, we can also, when viewing the novels as texts, acknowledge that the characters in those instances cannot be compared with human beings. In this way, we can embrace the possibility for possibility as these two binaries unravel themselves.

Nevertheless, we need to be careful as well of giving power to authority as we could inadvertently introduce a binary consisting of the internal fate-choice duality versus the external presumed authority. In other words, we must be cautious in giving power to authority because we could unintentionally introduce the struggle between that which exists outside the binary and that which is the binary.

Besides, perhaps fate and free will are concepts we have introduced as our way of understanding even more complex interactions of the world beyond our comprehension. We may have simply assigned labels to the forces we observe as “fate” and “free will”. Are we the J.K. Rowlings of this world, making up fate and free will as concepts to blame for any event that occurs? It already seems far-fetched that authority even exists to dictate how fate and free will interact (hence the decentered authority). But as we watch this very interpretation deconstruct itself, it is worthwhile to ask: is it also far-fetched that fate and free will exist?

²³ Jaques Derrida, ‘Signature Event Context’, Limited Inc, Northwestern University Press, 1988, p. 20.

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