

THE ROLE OF TIME IN NON-LINEAR FICTION NARRATIVES

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the structure of non-linear narratives in fiction literature in comparison with linear variants. It considers the concept of time and how it is represented and altered through writing in fiction literature. Additionally, the role of time and non-linearity is discussed from the perspective of the emotional effects it induces rather than linear, chronological narratives. With the use of qualitative research, international literature, and an original creative writing segment, this theory is analyzed.

Introduction

Stories, in their most basic interpretation, are created by isolating a sequence of events and presenting them to an audience. How a story is written noticeably impacts the way it will be received by readers since it considers characters, setting, tone, time, and several other aspects to make it whole. While every detail allows a story to raise various interpretations or perceptions, the importance of time is often overlooked compared to other aforementioned qualities which are deemed more important. From this perspective, time is mostly considered a means through which the story is told, but rather, this paper will analyze how the disruption of time in a story is capable of altering how the story is perceived and emphasizing certain aspects.

The traditional format of writing is linear, or chronological, where the events of the story unfold in a manner that follows the sequence in which they regularly occur. Disruptions of this chronology in the plot alter it to become non-linear storytelling. This approach to written narratives is complex and flexible to nearly any form that it can be given by the author's creativity since it does not follow the rules of sequential storytelling. Despite this, there are various approaches and techniques to non-linear storytelling which are used based on which is deemed appropriate for the narrative. This includes the simplest techniques mostly used such as flashbacks or memories and flash-forwards.

In written narratives, time is flexible and at the disposal of the author to isolate certain periods of time to convey them through the text, while leaving others out. The essence of linear and non-linear writing in this case is the same since stories written in a chronological sequence do not always flow every detail. For example, stories do not typically describe every detail of each day in the story unless it is valuable since this threatens the story becoming repetitive. Similarly, non-linear narratives choose which information to omit from the storyline but with the addition that events are occurring out of the normal sequence. This offers the author flexibility in weaving various events

that occurred with different temporal characteristics together into one comprehensible story.

Although time perceived by people is linear, readers are able to comprehend non-linear narratives.

Despite the fact that non-linear narratives are complex in structure, they are not absent of it. Hence, the grammatical structure and use of cause and effect in a story are the main factors which allow the reader to fully understand narratives written in this format.

Literature Review

Narratives are a prominent aspect of each person's life: from movies, books, conversations, and the daily occurrences one experiences. Regarding written narratives, the combination of characters, setting, and sequential events formulate a story in its most generalized form. The story is then narrated through the literary format and time of the author's choice, which both in their turn affect how the story is perceived. Genette (1980) specified four temporal types of narration which are the underlying foundation of how a story unfolds in prose. These are: subsequent (from past to present), prior (future tense), simultaneous (presentation of ongoing actions), and interpolated (in between various actions). Among these, interpolated is considered the most complex since it considers scenarios where the narrator exists in two places simultaneously (i.e. in epistolary second-person perspective, where the protagonist is retelling past occurrences combined with ongoing commentary).

Verb tenses are not the only representations of time in a narrative. There are at least four types of time which must be considered with a narrative. First, there is the time during which the events of the story took place, which is related to Genette's proposed temporal types. The next, is when the time of the narration of events takes place. Once again, this relates to the format of epistolary style where the events have already taken place in the past and are now being narrated,

while this “now” may be several minutes or years after the events have taken place in world of the story. The third and fourth exist outside of the story and are related to the time when the author wrote the story and the time when the text is received by the reader (Selden, Widdowson & Brooker, 2005).

It has been established that time is presented in a variety of aspects of a story, but in reality the concept of time varies. People experience time passing through the movement of events which leans primarily in a forward direction. This is referred to as linear time or otherwise the form of time that naturally and physically exists for people. Linearity considers that once an event occurs it is fixed in the past and the currently undergoing flows towards the future (Greene, 2010). In literature, time is represented within the restraints of the story where the reader has an omniscient perspective of the events taking place while in reality, people are not capable of experiencing time in this manner. People cannot experience time non-linearly, which is the perception of time in a rearranged order differing from the sequence in which it occurs.

The question arises of how non-linearity is structured through writing if this concept of time is not attainable in reality. In linear narratives, events are structured in A,B,C sequence while with non-linear storytelling it can vary from C, B, A or any other possible juxtaposition of these events. The use of literary devices such as flashbacks and flash-forwards is notable in this case. The techniques allow the narrative to jump back and forth in time to depict specific situations out of the regular sequential order in which they occur. These may be presented explicitly or implicitly. Specifically, the narrator in the text may explicitly recall a memory or in the case of science-fiction even use time travel to showcase time jumps (Kim et al, 2017). On the other hand, the author may opt for another approach which implements these techniques in the narrative without the reader’s direct knowledge that the sequence has been disrupted. In this case,

In addition to defining the structure of non-linear approach to storytelling, there is the issue of how readers are capable of comprehending narratives in this format. Structuralist theory defines

‘plot’ and ‘story’ to make this distinction. The story is defined as the entire compilation of events and details which entails certain meaning, while a plot is the representation of this story through a particular juxtaposition of the events based on cause and effect. This considers that time only flows in a linear matter and therefore the story does as well, although the plot may be represented in a non-linear approach by disrupting the original chain of events and rearranging them in a different sequence (Selden, Widdowson & Brooker, 2005).

The use of cause and effect with non-linear storytelling is necessary in order for the final outcome of the narrative to be comprehensible to the reader. The mere jumbling of events does not guarantee that it will make logical sense rather than cause confusion or offer any significance to the story instead of being told in a linear format. Aristotle (1961) wrote in *Poetics* that action is the foundation of a story and the transmitter of emotions, therefore he gave great value to correct plot construction. He defined that the three concepts of ‘beginning’, ‘middle’, and ‘end’ must be present in the plot to create a whole organism which he refers to as the story. Despite this, the order of these three elements is not necessary to keep in the traditional linear manner since readers have a sense of mentally tying narratives together comprehensibly as long as these elements exist logically in the plot.

Logical progression is what allows non-linear narratives to be attainable by the reader despite the disrupted order of time. In this sense, we are aware that ‘this leads to that’ but ‘that’ cannot lead to ‘this’. Greene (2010) wrote that the linear flow of time in people’s daily lives offers certain preconceptions. In the case that a carton of milk is being poured into a cup, a person already knows it will fill the cup. If this action is frozen right when the liquid is being poured, people will already predetermine that the milk will fill the cup rather than moving upwards since time cannot be reversed. People cannot non-linearly perceive the reverse instance of this action which is the primary reason people have certain expectations of cause and effect to the elements that exist in reality.

Similarly, Aristotle defines the beginning as a point after which events flow from, the middle as having events flowing to and fro, and finally the end as where all events eventually point to. Implementing this with cause and effect, the non-linear narrative will make sense to the reader while if this is not present then the string of narrative will appear as confusing or too abstract. This will result in achrony, where the narrative is not anchored by consistent temporal patterns (Kim et al, 2017).

Chatman (1978) also refers to causality as a valuable factor of narration narrows possibilities and expectations which lead the story towards the conclusion and creates connections throughout. He brings the example of “The king died and then the queen died” comparing it with “The king died and the queen died of grief,”. These short phrases define the basics of where there is a mere sequence of events (former) and connections between causality (latter). If logical cause and effect are not established in a story, whether it is linear or non-linear, then the story will become unintelligible to the reader to an extent since it will leave many questions unanswered. As in the case with the first phrase, this merely depicts events where the reader does not know if they are related to one another in any context and much is left up to interpretation. Such as, the reader might not tie together the concept that the queen in question is the wife of the king or it is a separate queen altogether.

There are various techniques to narrative disruption which maintain the logical progression of it. One of the common types is retrograde, where the plot is in reverse order from the original and flows from the conclusion towards the beginning. This is also often referred to as reverse chronological storytelling. This approach to storytelling emphasizes the consequences of the ultimate ending by working towards all of the factors which contributed to this ending (i.e. particular to detective or mystery genre prose). More commonly, analepsis and prolepsis are techniques which narrate previous events (flashbacks) or future events (flash-forwards) correspondingly (Kim et al, 2017) .

Zigzag patterned narratives are structured with the intertwining of two storylines in varying temporal backgrounds. The story may alternate between past and present, present and future, or any other combination. This is primarily achieved by cutting the story into two parts and intertwining them to create the new string of narrative. A common technique is splitting the story from the middle resulting in two strings of narrative: from point A to B, and from B to C (considering the story in A,B,C sequence). Therefore, each string is flowing in a particular direction independently, but will logically progress to the same ultimate conclusion by filling in the necessary information throughout (Kim et al, 2017).

Any one or combination of these techniques may be implemented to result in a significant plot for the narrative. Although, a factor which is taken into consideration throughout the process of organization of the plot is also the meaning it conveys. Brooks (2000) in agreement with the preliminary structure of plot that Aristotle brought forward, also considers that the concept of plot is more complex in its nature. The particular structure and organization of the plot in this case is to develop messages through temporal secession, which creates a metaphysical element to it. The plot is attached to other bodies of the story but is intentional and goal-oriented to convey a desired meaning which is not explicit.

Transmittable meanings through temporal disruptions with the use of the previously mentioned patterns vary in how the story is desired to unfold along a thread of narrative. Actions in the real world may be spread across a straight line which has a questionable beginning or end, in which case a story decides which specific segment of this line to represent. From here, memories or flashbacks are often used to insert necessary information to the story from an earlier period of time, where the gap between the 'then' and 'now' is not valuable or relevant to the plot. This is why the specific fragments are chosen to be inserted into the plot (Bal, 2009).

Bal (2009) mentions that nearly all narratives have certain disruptions in time, even those in chronological or linear order. The varying factor in this case is the extent of the disruption and the

complexity or span of it. Recalling a certain memory or past event is one of the features many stories have and it offers insight for unraveling a story, but this one instance does not alter the plot greatly. There may be temporal disparities beginning from a the micro element of a narrative: a single sentence. For example, “I remember when she hit me in the head with an apple,” is an example of a reference to the past while in present tense narration. These exist within all narratives and it does conclude in them being considered non-linear due to the length of the disparity. Therefore, when larger segments of the plot are isolated and scattered throughout the narrative, the likelihood that they attract attention by the reader is increased.

From this, it is apparent that linear narratives are expected to a certain degree, therefore, when a text is non-linear, the reader is more involved with their expectations by drawing parallels throughout the plot. Smith (1980), in accordance with Bal, states that nonlinear narratives have a dual temporal foundation which stands out among other texts because of that factor. They purposely stand out because of the fact that linear narratives are expected due to their commonality and closer representation to reality. Therefore, when there is a distinct disruption to what is known and expected, it allows the narrative to call attention to itself (Bal, 2009). When the particular events are isolated from their original order, this is carried out intentionally. Hence, the order of events, to an extent, dictates the amount of significance it is given and the perspective of interpretation which is desired.

The desired perspective is created through the elements of narration and plot, which includes all aspects used to represent a particular story. Smith (1980) brought forward the example of Cinderella as a basic example of how narration distorts how the story is perceived by the audience. A story in its most raw origin does not exist to an extent since it exists because of its medium, structure, form, and so on. The story cannot exist untold or unwritten, unexpressed or unpictured. This is all represented through narration to be achieved. Therefore, story and narration are dependent on one another and co-exist. She then brings forward the issue that if narration alters how

a story is perceived initially, then how are versions or interpretations of a story separated from the 'original'. In this case, it is narrowed down to the deepest ideas conveyed in the storyline. For example, when summarizing the story, the majority of it will be the same despite the version. Therefore, the core story is not altered through narration, the perception of the story is merely altered.

Bakhtin (1937) brought forward the concept of the 'chronotope' which in direct translation from Russian means 'space-time'. The chronotope is a complex concept which considers how the relationship of space and time directly is correlated to narrative and genre. According to him, the parameters of space and time created within a story or narrative is what determines the thematic structure of the narrative and the portrayal of events in it. The existence of the narrative itself is dependent on the chronotopic characteristics it includes. He also mentions:

"It is precisely the chronotope that provides the ground essential for the showing forth, the representability of events. ... It serves as the primary point from which 'scenes' in a novel unfold, while at the same time other 'binding' events, located far from the chronotope, appear as mere dry information and communicated facts ... Thus the chronotope, functioning as the primary means for materializing time in space, emerges as a center for concretizing representation, as a force giving body to the entire novel," (Bakhtin, 1937).

This literature review discussed the fundamental concepts related to non-linear storytelling structure and terminology regarding its practical use in written narratives. While the majority of sources in past and contemporary research offer in-depth knowledge on the various structures of narratives, the effect that time and order has on the story is not clearly defined. Many are aware that non-linear narratives offer new perspectives to a story, but it is valuable to identify the what desired outcomes originate from this disruption. The following will analyze and apply the afore-mentioned

concepts to further determine the connection between temporal disruption and the emphasis of certain emotional elements in fictional prose.

Research Questions and Methodology

The research conducted within the context of this paper will offer an in-depth understanding of the role of time in non-linear fiction narratives. In which case, by disrupting the sequence of events in a narrative through non-linear storytelling, certain elements are emphasized such as mystery, fear, or tension and where time acts as more than the backdrop of a story. Additionally, the paper will consider insight to the following questions: through what literary and grammar techniques is the abstract concept of time constructed in writing? How is time represented and flexible?

The primary methodology to this research is textual analysis accompanied by a creative project. The content consists of three main aspects: analysis of international literature, two short stories written within the framework of the creative project, and critical analysis of both in relation with the thesis and research questions.

To reflect on the research questions and thesis statement with an example from international literature, Ted Chiang's non-linear short story *The Story of Your Life* will be analyzed. The various plot lines in the story will be discussed and their relation to one another since the story includes three main strands of plot from the past, present, and future. The analysis will concentrate on identifying the linear sequence of events in the story in order to depict how the story would unfold without the temporal disruptions in the narrative.

Along with this, textual analysis is carried out on creative project itself, which consists of two short stories. The first story is written according to the natural, linear flow of events in the story, while the second differentiates from it only by the distortion of the sequence of events. This follows one technique of non-linear writing which is distorting the already written linear version instead of

initially writing it in this manner. The purpose of both short stories is to identify the changes of tone, theme, and mood between both in order to further prove the thesis statement.

The genre of the short stories is science-fiction. The plot follows the first-person-perspective of the female protagonist living several decades in the future of planet Earth. In the future, humans co-exist with foreign species in order to ensure the survival of the planet and mankind. The foreign species aids the self-destructing planet towards rehabilitation only with the precondition that they are offered residence on Earth. With the appearance of the protagonist's runaway twin sister who is strictly against the proposed agreement between both species, disagreements begin among the sisters. The main conflict regards a murder, that directly is related to the protagonist, which happens in the building which is a residence to thousands of people.

In the non-linear version, the final third portion of the story is separated into fragments and scattered throughout the first and second thirds of the linear version. There are not any changes in verb tense, actions, characters or any other details between both versions besides the sequence of the events occurring across a particular time period. The choice and dissemination of this information will impact how the story is perceived and this will be discussed in the analysis portion.

Creative Project

The Seed and the Soil

Linear Version

I wake to the silence of my apartment, dressing in my blue jumpsuit and wandering through the kitchen. Bee is awake and craving something sweet, so I grab a few apples I barely managed to buy from yesterday's crowded market. I take one last glance at the cloudy sky outside before exiting to the hallway.

I'm caught in the wave of people strolling through the halls immediately, it's almost noon and breacktime, but my morning is starting late today.

Becca is in the control room, flashing me her bubbly smile from across the room as I approach my desk.

"Hey," we say in unison.

"How's Raven?" I ask as I sit down.

"Good, he's resting now."

I nod and let my screen illuminate the blue-toned room.

"What about Bee?" She asks out of courtesy.

"She's doing okay, a bit tense since I've been overworked lately. But I guess you could tell."

"Yeah, but it's worth it in the end, you'll be promoted to Senior Keeper soon then you can get your long awaited rest." We both type a few commands into our computers as we talk. "You didn't miss much at the meeting this morning anyway."

A few more minutes of typing until, "Oh!" Becca screeches.

I, and most likely a few others in the room, jump a bit from that.

"Sorry," she whispers with her cheeks already red as fire. "The weather promised us some sunlight today, I can't wait to see if it's true." The smile won't leave her face even long after she's done speaking.

"I really doubt that's likely, it's still April and rainy, I wouldn't be too hopeful for another month or so."

She shrugs. "They said Summer is starting early this year."

I play with my long, brown ponytail alongside typing in the coordinates for all the trees in the surrounding area.

Lost in concentration, I barely notice the firm grip on my shoulder until I hear Seed's deep voice.

“Good afternoon Lina, is everything going along smoothly?”

I turn in my seat to look up at Seed, nearly a whole meter taller than me when I’m sitting.

“Progress is positive, all the risks have been assessed,” I say with a smile.

He nods in approval, “Well don’t stress yourself and Bee too much, take your time to make it perfect.”

“Of course.”

“And the new recruits just arrived, but Sina isn’t feeling well today. Leave this for later and go greet them, will you?”

“No problem, I’ll go to the First room now.”

He nods and pats me on the shoulder before disappearing.

I turn towards Becca as I lock my computer. “I’ll catch you for dinner maybe?”

“Sure.”

With that I step on my heel through the window-less halls, taking the elevator to the bottom floor. It takes a while, considering my floor is on the 64th level.”

The new recruits are waiting in the First room as I arrive, some tense and others relieved, judging by the balled up fists and tapping feet. I greet them with a smile to relieve most of the negative energy.

“Welcome everyone, my name is Lina and I’m here to guide you today.” I quickly scan my eyes across the people in the room, there’s a ginger haired girl which sparks my eye immediately, an older woman with a frail body, a bulky young adult, and a few others. “Everything seems intimidating now, perhaps even me, and I understand you completely. I assure you that you’re safe now, here.”

Silence still lingers as six individuals stare at me with their doe eyes, possibly scared for their lives.

“You surely have heard many myths and stories about us from outside, whether good or bad, and I’ll clarify everything now so that you are left without any confusion. Some of you may have come to us willingly, others saved, but none of that will matter now that we all live here together. This is our home for the time being, the dome protects this building and the two others near us from the contamination. The air is filtered and the freshest your lungs will breathe for the rest of your existence. This alone is a reason to be fascinated by the living conditions we offer.”

I pause for a moment, letting everything sink in but their blank faces don’t peel eyes away from me.

“I’ll give you a tour and escort you to your living quarters in a little, but before that there is particular protocol we follow here. You will be given a week of free time to adapt to our home, there are over a hundred floors you can ponder around. There is the lovely rooftop garden, a cafeteria and small markets every few floors, along with our indoor pool and entertainment rooms on the ground floors. Along with enjoying the commodities and highly innovative development we’ve achieved, you will be assigned a working position to benefit the society. If you are interested in preserving the outside world, you can join the Keepers, where I work currently. Otherwise we have other positions you will be familiarized with soon.”

“Is it true that *they* invade our bodies if we stay?” The teenage boy interrupts and everyone changes their gazes towards them.

I smile with reassurance. “You bring up my next topic, which is one that is misinterpreted often. Living at home means that you will be assigned as a host to one member of our foreign species which will reside in your body,”

The old woman cuts me off, “I knew it, you want us to be killed off.” Everyone in the room also gasps or hugs themselves in fear or continues tapping feet nervously.

“We merely act as anatomical hosts for the other species, I can assure you. They are a very submissive species and won’t bother you any more than affecting your eating and sleeping routines sometimes,” I say in the most calming tone I can.

“And what if we don’t agree to those terms?” The redhead speaks up, her bright hair and green gaze pierce my eyes. She looks too familiar. Or I want her to be.

“Everyone eventually understands that we offer you a future here, one that you aren’t guaranteed outside. Sooner or later, the innate need for survival kicks in.” I smile as a few moments of silence linger.

“Let’s go walk around the grounds.”

I tour the group to the gardens, cafeteria, offices, entertainment areas, and finally to the floor with their rooms.

“All of you were given a card for your rooms so the first number is the floor and the second is the door,” I attempt to raise my voice over the others filing through the halls for dinnertime.

As the group fades in the crowds to find their rooms, one girl from my group approaches me. “What’s the large pool in the middle of the building?” We both look out the window and down 12 floors to the large circle of water in the middle of the cylindrical building.

“Oh that’s the infinity pool, can’t believe I forgot to mention it. That’s where our main water supply comes from. I don’t know too much about it though. The architecture came from the other species and they basically worship water. It’s used both for regular uses all the way to spiritual and healing. They tell us the pool is endless.”

“A bottomless pool? Then how does it stay filled?”

I shrug. “I don’t know, the design is too complicated for us to grasp.” My stomach growls again as it has for the past few minutes. Bee and I both need food. “That’s some food for thought, speaking of, you’ll miss dinner so get ready.”

She nods and walks off with a smile.

I meet Becca in the cafeteria indulging in her bowl of warm potatoes. “I can’t wait until we can harvest decent vegetables and fruits,” she says with a mouthful as I sit down. “How was the group?”

“Draining, my head hurts from talking so much. Bee’s worn out too. And I haven’t had a decent meal all day.”

“Eat up then.” She pushes my food closer to me.

I poke my potatoes into a mash before eating it. “I can’t get the redhead from my group out of my mind today. She just reminded me so much.”

“Lina, we’ve talked about this.”

“I know.” I shake my head. “She’s probably dead.”

“Most definitely, no one can survive in that contamination for three years.”

“But then again, there are packs of new people coming in almost every other day. Full grown people, they’ve survived somehow right?”

A waitress interrupts us by setting down cups full of water in front of us. “Have a blessed meal,” she says every time the cup touches the table.

“They must have some sort of alliances, or something,” I continue.

“Maybe, but Avia needs some otherworldly survival instincts to make it alive either way.”

Knowing Avia, I’m sure she does.

On my day off, I roam around the rooftop garden. Partially for leisure, partially for more work.

I lean against the railing, looking hundreds of feet below at the dense trees surrounding the inside and outside of the dome. This is one of the few patches of natural greenery in the nearby area, a section of it enclosed in our dome that could be salvaged, and the contaminated species lying outside of it. The view is better here than other stations around the world where everything has been reduced to debris. Some kilometers north there's a small lake, half of the time it feels like an oasis since you have to squint to even see it. The water is contaminated anyway, not bringing itself much use. To the right, there are two other towering cylindrical buildings like ours.

I sit next to the railing with a basket of apples, analyzing them, and marking the peculiarities. I roll the apple around in my hand, jotting down the details with the other. The shortness of the stem catches my eye and I measure it. Compared to previous harvest records, the stem is much shorter. A slice in half reveals a relatively green tint on the inside. I check and slice all the rest in my basket in search of recurring patterns and they're nearly all identical.

Back inside, I speed-walk to Becca's apartment. It takes her some time to open the door.

"Hi, what's up?" she mumbles and rubs her eyes.

"Sorry if I bothered your nap, but can I come inside?"

"Mhmm."

I carry the basket of apples and my clipboard inside her apartment, which I wouldn't be able to differentiate from my own if it wasn't for the number on the front door.

"I was doing a screening of the latest apple harvest and you have to see the results."

Becca makes her way to the couch with barely her eyes open. "Do we have to discuss work on our only resting day of the week? I know you want to stay on top of things, but us normal people prefer sleeping."

"I know, I know, but look at this." I hand her the slices of apples.

She squints her eyes at them before looking back at me. "They're apples."

"Yes, but look how green they are inside, and the stems are barely there."

“They look like how apples have always been, Lina.”

“I’ve looked through all of the reports from previous harvests and they’ve only shown shorter stems and greener tints during each new harvest. What if they’re mutating? I should take a look with a microscope and report to Seed.”

“Lin, basically everything on this planet has or is mutating, I think Seed is going to tell you the same thing. We haven’t died from the apples yet, so even if it is then we’re immune to it.”

“Okay, I’ll just report it to Seed so he knows, and that’s it.”

She shakes her head with a laugh. “Great, now go enjoy the rest of your resting day. Take a swim to relax your tense nerves.”

“Yeah, I think Bee would like that too.”

Contrary to the usual gloom, the sun has been shining for the past three hours and everyone is ecstatic about it. Becca leaves the office every half hour or so with a random excuse to walk across the sunny hallway since the light isn’t hitting inside our office.

I decide to pick a few cherry tomatoes from the roof for lunch and enjoy the beams of heat on my back in the process. After a long discussion with Seed’s reassurance and a swim in the pool, I feel less hesitant of eating what we grow.

In my peripheral vision, I notice Becca running up to me erratically. It’s isn’t surprising that she hadn’t come up earlier. Though, as she gets closer to me I notice the usually excited expression of hers is covered with a worried one, maybe skeptical.

“Lina you need to come downstairs,” she says out of breath.

“Sorry, I just need to pick a few more.”

“Forget the tomatoes, I just saw *you* downstairs. Another you, on the seventh floor.”

“What are you talking about?” I turn away from the plant to look at her.

“I think it’s Avia, well it has to be. Who else looks like you besides you two?”

“I need to see her.” The basket full of tomatoes plops down on the floor as we both speed-walk to the elevator.

“How are we supposed to know what room she’s in?”

“Sina is their guide, we’ll ask her,” Becca says as we near the seventh floor.

“I’ll look around the hall, shouldn’t be easy to miss.” I begin pacing around the circular hall as Becca rushes in the opposite direction. After on full circle around the floor, I lean against the railing next to the window as Becca attempts to contact Sina.

“She says most of the group went up for lunch, I’ll go check there.” She’s already near the elevator bank immediately after the words leave her lips.

I slowly tour across the floor, several times. My ears are already numb to the chatter of anyone passing by and my eyes blur everyone together in the endless circle.

When I see her, I’m already in a trance of some sort. On my third walk around the hall, she comes up to me. Nothing has changed, she is just as I remember: long ginger hair pulled up in a ponytail, straight posture, and the most intimidating facial expression I know. We stand a few feet apart from each other without talking for a while.

“I’m glad you’re alive,” is all I am able to mumble out.

“So you remember me?” Her voice is stern, giving away no emotion.

“How could I ever forget?” my voice croaks at her skepticism.

She takes a step closer, locking her gaze with mine but it’s too strong for me to stare into for long. “Thought you’d forget after three years of brainwashing.”

I shake my head. “I’m still Lina in the flesh and blood, I swear there is nothing happening here like that.”

“You haven’t even visited mom and dad’s grave for three years, you’re not the same Lina.”

“It’s contaminated out there, we can’t leave unless it’s for a very good, and approved, reason. You think I never wanted to?”

“We lived on that contaminated place for 18 years of our lives, me more than you.”

“How did you survive?” I lower my voice with everyone passing by after the end of lunch.

“Like a normal person. I would return in a heartbeat, if it wasn’t for your extraterrestrial friends bringing me here against my will.”

“You’ll like it here more. Everything is centuries ahead of our time and cleaner.” I make an attempt to take hold of her hands to break her resistance, but she pulls away.

“None of that matters when the real world is out there while you stay locked away in this bubble.” She turns on her heel with her arms crossed against her chest and walks away.

I don’t know what I expected upon seeing her. A part of me wanted her to hug me as any normal person would after not seeing their twin sister for three years. The other part of me knew Avia was never that simple. She questions everything around her, just as I do. We don’t always accept what’s given easily. I just wish she wouldn’t question me.

I try my best to concentrate on work today. My eyes are glued to the screen gleaming blue light into the dim room. My forehead is starting to heavy, threatening an emerging headache.

“I’m tired too Bee, hang in there for another hour,” I mumble to myself, and Bee.

The familiar swoosh of the sliding door fills the silent room as I notice Seed’s silhouette in the reflection of my screen. I turn in my seat just as he reaches me with a grin on his otherwise stern face.

“I have excellent news for you Lina. The test results for the tree detoxification bands came back to us and there is seventy-five percent efficiency among the trees tested for the past month. We

want you to continue developing the project, so you will be promoted to a senior Keeper status starting from next week.”

I let out a sigh of relief. “That truly is amazing, I wasn’t expecting it to work well in this short amount of time. Thank you very much.” I’m unable to hold back my smile from ear to ear.

“You always underestimate yourself Lina. Give yourself some credit.” He sets the electronic tablet with the test results on my desk. “In other news, we are also moving you to one of the family suites across the hall from your apartment since your sibling is now with you. I’m sure you and Bee will also enjoy the extra space.”

“Thanks, for everything.” We exchange smiles and he leaves the office. It’s hard to tell how Avia will react to sharing a living quarter together, but it’s the best way to keep an eye on her.

I decide to finish early and go to the indoor swimming pool on the first floor. I can feel Bee tensing up at least several times a day and it keeps me out of focus. This will refresh both of us.

I dive into the topaz blue water as far down as the pool goes. Towards the wall, there are tall glass windows which look into the deep water reserve outside. The glass stretches to the bottom of the indoor pool and I lean against it, noticing how dark the water becomes at the end when the sunlight from above fades. I want to swim to the bottom of it, to see just how “bottomless” it is, but that’s impossible permission to be granted.

After several minutes underwater I resurface. The muscles of my body are loose and Bee is already feeling dazed. At least we’ll sleep well tonight. I leave the pool after a few quick laps around, enjoying how empty it is during work hours.

In our old apartment, I gather a bag full of a few necessities to take to the new one for the night. I want to try my luck with Avia, this can’t go on forever.

To my surprise, she’s in the new and large apartment across the hall. It has two full bedrooms and a living space twice the size of the previous, with floor to ceiling windows overlooking the infinity pool from each room.

Avia's restless fingers tapping against the glass bring me back from my awed state.

"Is there anything to drink besides water around here?" she hisses, starting a conversation with me but acting as though she doesn't want to. That tone of voice is all too familiar from our childhood.

"No, that's the cleanest liquid we can guarantee to drink now."

"Well, it tastes like sea water mixed with detergent. Exactly the same stuff you poured into our lake a week ago."

"Yeah, my coworker Becca is on that project to replace the toxic lake water with an infinity pool like ours. I didn't know they had finished it already." I set my bag of clothes on the couch and walk up to the window next to her.

"About six people I knew were poisoned to death after they drank the new lake water you supposedly cleansed. The rest of us got caught running to a new site because of all the sun exposure that day. The water we had was clean, we drank and bathed in it every single day. You really don't know anything about life out there."

"The water is induced with minerals and vitamins in order to maintain its freshness in these conditions. It might have come as a shock to their organisms that were used to dirty water."

"Are you even hearing yourself right now? Why would clean water kill anyone? And you say everything so nonchalantly like everything you care about is here. There is still life out there, more humans surviving than you would think. Our greatest fear out there is you and your tribe of aliens. We've slept basically underground and in caves or ditches or trees, anything we had to avoid all of you."

Bee and I tense up instantly, as if all the efforts of calming down from the pool were gradually exiting my body. I clench my jaw as each word leaves Avia's lips.

"You've always been ungrateful, you know that? Even when mom and dad were alive you never liked anything. I have been working here for three years to finally become promoted, to

finally use my background in botany to regenerate life on the outside land so don't act like you know everything about what I care about or not."

"All of you have everything you could ever want right here in this building, why would you care about cleaning up the mess out there? Your extraterrestrial friends are just real good at making you think you're doing something important when they're waiting for the chance to lay their roots here." She nearly pushes herself against me until her face is just above mine. It's like staring into a mirror but only the person in front of you is partially a stranger.

"You don't know how much they've helped us, we'd be extinct without them."

Avia cuts me off enraged, "Get that thing out of you and talk to me as Lina! Not with that thing." She immediately tugs at my clothes, trying to find any incision scars. "Where is it?! Did they put that thing in your body or head?"

"Stop that!" I push her trespassing hands off me as much as possible but there isn't any doubt she's been in the wild for three years while I've been sitting in an office room.

"I won't have a logical conversation while it's inside you!"

The calmness flowing through my veins is instantly changed with pulsing rage. Bee is just as afraid for her life as I am. "Avia, stop!" I push her back with both arms. "You can't take Bee out with your bare hands are you insane?!" She lunges back onto me.

"You give names to those parasites too?!" She claws at my clothes, grazing my neck with her fingernail right near my scar.

A wail escapes my mouth both mine and Bee's. The stinging pain wavers through my entire body, as if vibrating from within. My hands reach to grab Avia's neck with both hands with a newfound adrenaline rush of pain. Only screams with muffled words fill the room as all the energy from my body focuses into my hands. They pull her back into the room only to lunge her swiftly against the glass window, her body weight cracking it entirely. With another push, her body flies through the glass.

With my quivering hands and spaghetti-like legs I lean against the intact glass and watch down as her body falls towards the infinity pool. A few seconds later she isn't anything more than a red speck falling into the water with screams echoing the entire center of the cylinder.

Despite the panic, my mind is still overly aware of everything I see and hear. With Avia's screams accompanied by the splash into the water, dozens of silhouettes approach the windows overlooking the pool. I nearly lunge myself to the light switch to avoid attracting attention to the window.

She's gone, out of the way. No more pointless arguments.

I scavenge for my bag of belongings in the dark, only accompanied by my heavy and fast breathing. I rush out of the apartment without locking the door and back down the hall to mine and Bee's old one.

But she was my twin, the only surviving member of my family.

I lock the front door and walk up to my window which is exactly across the new apartment. The broken glass isn't visible in the dark at least. That will save time until morning before inspections will start.

It was self-defense, she would have hurt me, and Bee. It was the right decision.

I continue breathing heavily until the voices in my head and vision transform into blurs. It's only when I wake up to realize I fell asleep on the floor next to the window.

I blink a few times until my eyes adjust to the brightness of early morning. It takes only one glance at caution tape strung across the shards of glass for the memories of yesterday to flood my mind. I thought it would be further into the day before anyone noticed the broken window.

Once I'm standing upright on my numb legs, a wave of panic washes over me. Going to work would raise less suspicions but they would definitely interrogate me. After all, this is the first murder to occur here since my arrival. Everyone will be talking about it.

It takes an uncountable amount of time for me to put my uniform on and slip out of the apartment. The accident happened on the other side of the hall, leaving this side completely empty and mundane. I sigh with relief as I make it to the elevator without any interference. Although I'm not as lucky once I reach the office floor.

"Why would anyone commit suicide with all the amenities we have here?" A brunette woman passing by states.

"The idea of supernatural activity is more plausible than that!"

I speed-walk to my working quarters where Becca jumps out of her seat as is expected when Becca hears about something dramatic.

"Oh my, did you hear about what happened on your floor?"

I sit next to her and whisper, hinting that she shouldn't yell either, "Yes, yes. I heard a scream last night."

"Me too!" This time the others shush her and she leans closer to me instead. "And we have no idea who, or what!" She whisper-yells.

"Let's just concentrate on work, please. My head is aching." I stutter a few words but the headache bit anchors her to stop talking.

Bee and I are both frazzled at the end of the day. I'm dreading the walk back to my apartment, knowing more people know at this point. It isn't until the cleaner for the night shift sweeps me out of the office that I decide to wander the empty halls back.

Any apartment or hallway window a few floors above or lower can see the shards sticking out of the broken window. Only the wind gently grazes the caution tape every now and then. There isn't even visible blood. The fall was swift and clean, dropping into the blue below. The body is long gone, sinking to the end of the infinity pool. Whether or not it will finally rest on the bottom of it or not is unknown too.

Despite my exhaustion, I don't sleep the entire night. Bee has cocooned herself into the back of my mind, not making any requests and giving me personal space if that's the right way to call it. I am too tired to even be startled when there is a knock at the door around sunrise.

"Lina, It's Seed. May I come in?"

I roll myself from the couch and to the door, inviting him inside.

"Good morning," I manage to mumble out.

"Likewise." We sit on the couch. "Lina, what happened in your new apartment? I haven't seen or heard of your sister either. I think you would like to tell me something." Seed always cuts to the chase, and he is capable of putting two and two together.

I don't know what to say to him. My brain is fried from piecing sentences together all night to consolidate myself. If he knows what I did then he is here to send me in exile or something worse that is probably mentioned in the rule book that I can't remember now.

He continues, "I don't like rumors, coming straight to the source is my approach. Lina, if you did something, it's best you tell me now."

"I think you know what I did." I look down and fumble with my fingers.

"Considering we monitor Bee's status remotely, I know she suffered great trauma from that incident. But I want to know the entirety of the situation."

"She was talking nonsense, and blaming me and you and this entire system. She was harassing me, threatening to remove Bee, and I don't remember the rest. I pushed her out and I didn't have a good enough reason to."

Once the words pour out of me in an instance, the room is silent for another long moment.

"You defended yourself and your family, and now it's time that I protect you in return for your deed. Rebellious humans cannot be stable hosts for our kind, they are a threat to harmony we work so hard for. That is why I'm not punishing you, instead I have a better offer for the overall wellbeing."

My head remains low but I look up at him in my peripheral vision.

“No one knows this was your new apartment besides us, we’ll tell everyone it was a suicide incident. You can also go down to the laboratory to have that gruesome memory removed from your mind. That way neither you or Bee will suffer from that emotional baggage. What do you say?”

**

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I sit on the armchair next my window, staring across at the only scarred window among the thousands of perfect ones. It will be back to normal tomorrow or the other day, as if nothing ever happened. I decide to not get lost in the conspiracy theories like everyone else. Accidents happen and people die every day outside in the wild. Either way, the view is a breath of fresh air in a way although for all the wrong reasons. Who knows when the time will be that I have an interesting view outside of my window, especially in a lifetime where we’ve forgotten what sunsets look like.

My eyes remain glued outside, locked on glass shards of the large window some few meters across from mine. I look until my eyes overrule my ability to stay conscious.

Nobody knows that happened in that room that day.

They can make educated guesses, and they do. No one knows for sure though.

The Seed and the Soil

Non-Linear Version

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They can make educated guesses, and they do. No one knows for sure though.

My eyes remain glued outside, locked on glass shards of the large window some few meters across from mine. I look until my eyes overrule my ability to stay conscious.

I wake to the silence of my apartment, dressing in my blue jumpsuit and wandering through the kitchen. Bee is awake and craving something sweet, so I grab a few apples I barely managed to buy from yesterday's crowded market. I take one last glance at the cloudy sky outside before exiting to the hallway.

I'm caught in the wave of people strolling through the halls immediately, it's almost noon and breaktime, but my morning is starting late today.

"Why would anyone commit suicide with all the amenities we have here?" A brunette woman passing by states.

“The idea of supernatural activity is more plausible than that!”

I speed-walk to my working quarters where Becca jumps out of her seat as is expected when she hears about something dramatic.

“Hey,” we say in unison.

“Oh my, did you hear about what happened on your floor?”

I sit next to her and whisper, hinting that she shouldn’t yell either, “Yes, yes. I heard a scream last night.”

“Me too!” This time the others shush her and she leans closer to me instead. “And we have no idea who, or what!” She whisper-yells.

“Let’s just concentrate on work, please. My head is aching.” I stutter a few words but the headache bit anchors her to stop talking.

“How’s Raven?” I ask as I sit down.

“Good, he’s resting now.”

I nod and let my screen illuminate the blue-toned room.

“What about Bee?” She asks out of courtesy.

“She’s doing okay, a bit tense since I’ve been overworked lately. But I guess you could tell.”

“Yeah, but it’s worth it in the end, you’ll be promoted to Senior Keeper soon then you can get your long awaited rest.” We both type a few commands into our computers as we talk. “You didn’t miss much at the meeting this morning anyway.”

A few more minutes of typing until, “Oh!” Becca screeches.

I, and most likely a few others in the room, jump a bit from that.

“Sorry,” she whispers with her cheeks already red as fire. “The weather promised us some sunlight today, I can’t wait to see if it’s true.” The smile won’t leave her face even long after she’s done speaking.

“I really doubt that’s likely, it’s still April and rainy, I wouldn’t be too hopeful for another month or so.”

She shrugs. “They said Summer is starting early this year.”

I play with my long, brown ponytail alongside typing in the coordinates for all the trees in the surrounding area.

Lost in concentration, I barely notice the firm grip on my shoulder until I hear Seed’s deep voice.

“Good afternoon Lina, is everything going along smoothly?”

I turn in my seat to look up at Seed, nearly a whole meter taller than me when I’m sitting.

“Progress is positive, all the risks have been assessed,” I say with a smile.

He nods in approval, “Well don’t stress yourself and Bee too much, take your time to make it perfect.”

“Of course.”

“And the new recruits just arrived, but Sina isn’t feeling well today. Leave this for later and go greet them, will you?”

“No problem, I’ll go to the First room now.”

He nods and pats me on the shoulder before disappearing.

I turn towards Becca as I lock my computer. “I’ll catch you for dinner maybe?”

“Sure.”

With that I step on my heel through the window-less halls, taking the elevator to the bottom floor. It takes a while, considering my floor is on the 64th level.”

The new recruits are waiting in the First room as I arrive, some tense and others relieved, judging by the balled up fists and tapping feet. I greet them with a smile to relieve most of the negative energy.

“Welcome everyone, my name is Lina and I’m here to guide you today.” I quickly scan my eyes across the people in the room, there’s a ginger haired girl which sparks my eye immediately, an older woman with a frail body, a bulky young adult, and a few others. “Everything seems intimidating now, perhaps even me, and I understand you completely. I assure you that you’re safe now, here.”

Silence still lingers as six individuals stare at me with their doe eyes, possibly scared for their lives.

“You surely have heard many myths and stories about us from outside, whether good or bad, and I’ll clarify everything now so that you are left without any confusion. Some of you may have come to us willingly, others saved, but none of that will matter now that we all live here together. This is our home for the time being, the dome protects this building and the two others near us from the contamination. The air is filtered and the freshest your lungs will breathe for the rest of your existence. This alone is a reason to be fascinated by the living conditions we offer.”

I pause for a moment, letting everything sink in but their blank faces don’t peel eyes away from me.

“I’ll give you a tour and escort you to your living quarters in a little, but before that there is particular protocol we follow here. You will be given a week of free time to adapt to our home, there are over a hundred floors you can ponder around. There is the lovely rooftop garden, a cafeteria and small markets every few floors, along with our indoor pool and entertainment rooms on the ground floors. Along with enjoying the commodities and highly innovative development we’ve achieved, you will be assigned a working position to benefit the society. If you are interested in preserving the outside world, you can join the Keepers, where I work currently. Otherwise we have other positions you will be familiarized with soon.”

“Is it true that *they* invade our bodies if we stay?” The teenage boy interrupts and everyone changes their gazes towards them.

I smile with reassurance. “You bring up my next topic, which is one that is misinterpreted often. Living at home means that you will be assigned as a host to one member of our foreign species which will reside in your body,”

The old woman cuts me off, “I knew it, you want us to be killed off.” Everyone in the room also gasps or hugs themselves in fear or continues tapping feet nervously.

“We merely act as anatomical hosts for the other species, I can assure you. They are a very submissive species and won’t bother you any more than affecting your eating and sleeping routines sometimes,” I say in the most calming tone I can.

“And what if we don’t agree to those terms?” The redhead speaks up, her bright hair and green gaze pierce my eyes. She looks too familiar. Or I want her to be.

“Everyone eventually understands that we offer you a future here, one that you aren’t guaranteed outside. Sooner or later, the innate need for survival kicks in.” I smile as a few moments of silence linger.

“Let’s go walk around the grounds.”

I tour the group to the gardens, cafeteria, offices, entertainment areas, and finally to the floor with their rooms.

“All of you were given a card for your rooms so the first number is the floor and the second is the door,” I attempt to raise my voice over the others filing through the halls for dinnertime.

As the group fades in the crowds to find their rooms, one girl from my group approaches me. “What’s the large pool in the middle of the building?” We both look out the window and down 12 floors to the large circle of water in the middle of the cylindrical building.

“Oh that’s the infinity pool, can’t believe I forgot to mention it. That’s where our main water supply comes from. I don’t know too much about it though. The architecture came from the other species and they basically worship water. It’s used both for regular uses all the way to spiritual and healing. They tell us the pool is endless.”

“A bottomless pool? Then how does it stay filled?”

I shrug. “I don’t know, the design is too complicated for us to grasp.” My stomach growls again as it has for the past few minutes. Bee and I both need food. “That’s some food for thought, speaking of, you’ll miss dinner so get ready.”

She nods and walks off with a smile.

I meet Becca in the cafeteria indulging in her bowl of warm potatoes. “I can’t wait until we can harvest decent vegetables and fruits,” she says with a mouthful as I sit down. “How was the group?”

“Draining, my head hurts from talking so much. Bee’s worn out too. And I haven’t had a decent meal all day.”

“Eat up then.” She pushes my food closer to me.

I poke my potatoes into a mash before eating it. “I can’t get the redhead from my group out of my mind today. She just reminded me so much.”

“Lina, we’ve talked about this.”

“I know.” I shake my head. “She’s probably dead.”

“Most definitely, no one can survive in that contamination for three years.”

“But then again, there are packs of new people coming in almost every other day. Full grown people, they’ve survived somehow right?”

A waitress interrupts us by setting down cups full of water in front of us. “Have a blessed meal,” she says every time the cup touches the table.

“They must have some sort of alliances, or something,” I continue.

“Maybe, but Avia needs some otherworldly survival instincts to make it alive either way.”

Knowing Avia, I’m sure she does.

Days later everyone is still discussing the incident across the hall. Some inspectors took interviews of the nearby apartments or anyone who wanted to claim as a victim in any way. People's speculations branched out to a possible murderer or even as far-fetched as ghosts. Seed speculates that suicide is the most plausible theory and they will close the case with that, but people's imagination still likes to roam.

I sit on the armchair next my window, staring across at the only scarred window among the thousands of perfect ones. It will be back to normal tomorrow or the other day, as if nothing ever happened. I decide to not get lost in the conspiracy theories like everyone else. Accidents happen and people die every day outside in the wild. Either way, the view is a breath of fresh air in a way although for all the wrong reasons. Who knows when the time will be that I have an interesting view outside of my window, especially in a lifetime where we've forgotten what sunsets look like.

On my day off, I roam around the rooftop garden. Partially for leisure, partially for more work.

I lean against the railing, looking hundreds of feet below at the dense trees surrounding the inside and outside of the dome. This is one of the few patches of natural greenery in the nearby area, a section of it enclosed in our dome that could be salvaged, and the contaminated species lying outside of it. The view is better here than other stations around the world where everything has been reduced to debris. Some kilometers north there's a small lake, half of the time it feels like an oasis since you have to squint to even see it. The water is contaminated anyway, not bringing itself much use. To the right, there are two other towering cylindrical buildings like ours.

I sit next to the railing with a basket of apples, analyzing them, and marking the peculiarities. I roll the apple around in my hand, jotting down the details with the other. The

shortness of the stem catches my eye and I measure it. Compared to previous harvest records, the stem is much shorter. A slice in half reveals a relatively green tint on the inside. I check and slice all the rest in my basket in search of recurring patterns and they're nearly all identical.

Back inside, I speed-walk to Becca's apartment. It takes her some time to open the door.

"Hi, what's up?" she mumbles and rubs her eyes.

"Sorry if I bothered your nap, but can I come inside?"

"Mhmm."

I carry the basket of apples and my clipboard inside her apartment, which I wouldn't be able to differentiate from my own if it wasn't for the number on the front door.

"I was doing a screening of the latest apple harvest and you have to see the results."

Becca makes her way to the couch with barely her eyes open. "Do we have to discuss work on our only resting day of the week? I know you want to stay on top of things, but us normal people prefer sleeping."

"I know, I know, but look at this." I hand her the slices of apples.

She squints her eyes at them before looking back at me. "They're apples."

"Yes, but look how green they are inside, and the stems are barely there."

"They look like how apples have always been, Lina."

"I've looked through all of the reports from previous harvests and they've only shown shorter stems and greener tints during each new harvest. What if they're mutating? I should take a look with a microscope and report to Seed."

"Lin, basically everything on this planet has or is mutating, I think Seed is going to tell you the same thing. We haven't died from the apples yet, so even if it is then we're immune to it."

"Okay, I'll just report it to Seed so he knows, and that's it."

She shakes her head with a laugh. "Great, now go enjoy the rest of your resting day. Take a swim to relax your tense nerves."

“Yeah, I think Bee would like that too.”

Days later everyone is still discussing the incident across the hall. Some inspectors took interviews of the nearby apartments or anyone who wanted to claim as a victim in any way. People’s speculations branched out to a possible murderer or even as far-fetched as ghosts. Seed speculates that suicide is the most plausible theory and they will close the case with that, but people’s imagination still likes to roam.

Contrary to the usual gloom, the sun has been shining for the past three hours and everyone is ecstatic about it. Becca leaves the office every half hour or so with a random excuse to walk across the sunny hallway since the light isn’t hitting inside our office.

I decide to pick a few cherry tomatoes from the roof for lunch and enjoy the beams of heat on my back in the process. After a long discussion with Seed’s reassurance and a swim in the pool, I feel less hesitant of eating what we grow.

In my peripheral vision, I notice Becca running up to me erratically. It’s isn’t surprising that she hadn’t come up earlier. Though, as she gets closer to me I notice the usually excited expression of hers is covered with a worried one, maybe skeptical.

“Lina you need to come downstairs,” she says out of breath.

“Sorry, I just need to pick a few more.”

“Forget the tomatoes, I just saw *you* downstairs. Another you, on the seventh floor.”

“What are you talking about?” I turn away from the plant to look at her.

“I think it’s Avia, well it has to be. Who else looks like you besides you two?”

“I need to see her.” The basket full of tomatoes plops down on the floor as we both speed-walk to the elevator.

“How are we supposed to know what room she’s in?”

“Sina is their guide, we’ll ask her,” Becca says as we near the seventh floor.

“I’ll look around the hall, shouldn’t be easy to miss.” I begin pacing around the circular hall as Becca rushes in the opposite direction. After on full circle around the floor, I lean against the railing next to the window as Becca attempts to contact Sina.

“She says most of the group went up for lunch, I’ll go check there.” She’s already near the elevator bank immediately after the words leave her lips.

I slowly tour across the floor, several times. My ears are already numb to the chatter of anyone passing by and my eyes blur everyone together in the endless circle.

When I see her, I’m already in a trance of some sort. On my third walk around the hall, she comes up to me. Nothing has changed, she is just as I remember: long ginger hair pulled up in a ponytail, straight posture, and the most intimidating facial expression I know. We stand a few feet apart from each other without talking for a while.

“I’m glad you’re alive,” is all I am able to mumble out.

“So you remember me?” Her voice is stern, giving away no emotion.

“How could I ever forget?” my voice croaks at her skepticism.

She takes a step closer, locking her gaze with mine but it’s too strong for me to stare into for long. “Thought you’d forget after three years of brainwashing.”

I shake my head. “I’m still Lina in the flesh and blood, I swear there is nothing happening here like that.”

“You haven’t even visited mom and dad’s grave for three years, you’re not the same Lina.”

“It’s contaminated out there, we can’t leave unless it’s for a very good, and approved, reason. You think I never wanted to?”

“We lived on that contaminated place for 18 years of our lives, me more than you.”

“How did you survive?” I lower my voice with everyone passing by after the end of lunch.

“Like a normal person. I would return in a heartbeat, if it wasn’t for your extraterrestrial friends bringing me here against my will.”

“You’ll like it here more. Everything is centuries ahead of our time and cleaner.” I make an attempt to take hold of her hands to break her resistance, but she pulls away.

“None of that matters when the real world is out there while you stay locked away in this bubble.” She turns on her heel with her arms crossed against her chest and walks away.

I don’t know what I expected upon seeing her. A part of me wanted her to hug me as any normal person would after not seeing their twin sister for three years. The other part of me knew Avia was never that simple. She questions everything around her, just as I do. We don’t always accept what’s given easily. I just wish she wouldn’t question me.

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“I’m tired too Bee, hang in there for another hour,” I mumble to myself, and Bee.

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I let out a sigh of relief. "That truly is amazing, I wasn't expecting it to work well in this short amount of time. Thank you very much." I'm unable to hold back my smile from ear to ear.

"You always underestimate yourself Lina. Give yourself some credit." He sets the electronic tablet with the test results on my desk. "In other news, we are also moving you to one of the family suites across the hall from your apartment since your sibling is now with you. I'm sure you and Bee will also enjoy the extra space."

"Thanks, for everything." We exchange smiles and he leaves the office. It's hard to tell how Avia will react to sharing a living quarter together, but it's the best way to keep an eye on her.

I decide to finish early and go to the indoor swimming pool on the first floor. I can feel Bee tensing up at least several times a day and it keeps me out of focus. This will refresh both of us.

I dive into the topaz blue water as far down as the pool goes. Towards the wall, there are tall glass windows which look into the deep water reserve outside. The glass stretches to the bottom of the indoor pool and I lean against it, noticing how dark the water becomes at the end when the sunlight from above fades. I want to swim to the bottom of it, to see just how "bottomless" it is, but that's impossible permission to be granted.

After several minutes underwater I resurface. The muscles of my body are loose and Bee is already feeling dazed. At least we'll sleep well tonight. I leave the pool after a few quick laps around, enjoying how empty it is during work hours.

In our old apartment, I gather a bag full of a few necessities to take to the new one for the night. I want to try my luck with Avia, this can't go on forever.

To my surprise, she's in the new and large apartment across the hall. It has two full bedrooms and a living space twice the size of the previous, with floor to ceiling windows overlooking the infinity pool from each room.

Avia's restless fingers tapping against the glass bring me back from my awed state.

"Is there anything to drink besides water around here?" she hisses, starting a conversation with me but acting as though she doesn't want to. That tone of voice is all too familiar from our childhood.

"No, that's the cleanest liquid we can guarantee to drink now."

"Well, it tastes like sea water mixed with detergent. Exactly the same stuff you poured into our lake a week ago."

"Yeah, my coworker Becca is on that project to replace the toxic lake water with an infinity pool like ours. I didn't know they had finished it already." I set my bag of clothes on the couch and walk up to the window next to her.

"About six people I knew were poisoned to death after they drank the new lake water you supposedly cleansed. The rest of us got caught running to a new site because of all the sun exposure that day. The water we had was clean, we drank and bathed in it every single day. You really don't know anything about life out there."

"The water is induced with minerals and vitamins in order to maintain its freshness in these conditions. It might have come as a shock to their organisms that were used to dirty water."

"Are you even hearing yourself right now? Why would clean water kill anyone? And you say everything so nonchalantly like everything you care about is here. There is still life out there, more humans surviving than you would think. Our greatest fear out there is you and your tribe of

aliens. We've slept basically underground and in caves or ditches or trees, anything we had to avoid all of you."

Bee and I tense up instantly, as if all the efforts of calming down from the pool were gradually exiting my body. I clench my jaw as each word leaves Avia's lips.

"You've always been ungrateful, you know that? Even when mom and dad were alive you never liked anything. I have been working here for three years to finally become promoted, to finally use my background in botany to regenerate life on the outside land so don't act like you know everything about what I care about or not."

"All of you have everything you could ever want right here in this building, why would you care about cleaning up the mess out there? Your extraterrestrial friends are just real good at making you think you're doing something important when they're waiting for the chance to lay their roots here." She nearly pushes herself against me until her face is just above mine. It's like staring into a mirror but only the person in front of you is partially a stranger.

"You don't know how much they've helped us, we'd be extinct without them."

Avia cuts me off enraged, "Get that thing out of you and talk to me as Lina! Not with that thing." She immediately tugs at my clothes, trying to find any incision scars. "Where is it?! Did they put that thing in your body or head?"

"Stop that!" I push her trespassing hands off me as much as possible but there isn't any doubt she's been in the wild for three years while I've been sitting in an office room.

"I won't have a logical conversation while it's inside you!"

The calmness flowing through my veins is instantly changed with pulsing rage. Bee is just as afraid for her life as I am. "Avia, stop!" I push her back with both arms. "You can't take Bee out with your bare hands are you insane?!" She lunges back onto me.

"You give names to those parasites too?!" She claws at my clothes, grazing my neck with her fingernail right near my scar.

A wail escapes my mouth both mine and Bee's. The stinging pain wavers through my entire body, as if vibrating from within. My hands reach to grab Avia's neck with both hands with a newfound adrenaline rush of pain. Only screams with muffled words fill the room as all the energy from my body focuses into my hands. They pull her back into the room only to lunge her swiftly against the glass window, her body weight cracking it entirely. With another push, her body flies through the glass.

With my quivering hands and spaghetti-like legs I lean against the intact glass and watch down as her body falls towards the infinity pool. A few seconds later she isn't anything more than a red speck falling into the water with screams echoing the entire center of the cylinder.

Despite the panic, my mind is still overly aware of everything I see and hear. With Avia's screams accompanied by the splash into the water, dozens of silhouettes approach the windows overlooking the pool. I nearly lunge myself to the light switch to avoid attracting attention to the window.

She's gone, out of the way. No more pointless arguments.

I scavenge for my bag of belongings in the dark, only accompanied by my heavy and fast breathing. I rush out of the apartment without locking the door and back down the hall to mine and Bee's old one.

But she was my twin, the only surviving member of my family.

I lock the front door and walk up to my window which is exactly across the new apartment. The broken glass isn't visible in the dark at least. That will save time until morning before inspections will start.

It was self-defense, she would have hurt me, and Bee. It was the right decision.

I continue breathing heavily until the voices in my head and vision transform into blurs. It's only when I wake up to realize I fell asleep on the floor next to the window.

I blink a few times until my eyes adjust to the brightness of early morning. It takes only one glance at caution tape strung across the shards of glass for the memories of yesterday to flood my mind. I thought it would be further into the day before anyone noticed the broken window.

Once I'm standing upright on my numb legs, a wave of panic washes over me. Going to work would raise less suspicions but they would definitely interrogate me. After all, this is the first murder to occur here since my arrival. Everyone will be talking about it.

It takes an uncountable amount of time for me to put my uniform on and slip out of the apartment. The accident happened on the other side of the hall, leaving this side completely empty and mundane. I sigh with relief as I make it to the elevator without any interference. Although I'm not as lucky once I reach the office floor.

Despite my exhaustion, I don't sleep the entire night. Bee has cocooned herself into the back of my mind, not making any requests and giving me personal space if that's the right way to call it. I am too tired to even be startled when there is a knock at the door around sunrise.

"Lina, It's Seed. May I come in?"

I roll myself from the couch and to the door, inviting him inside.

"Good morning," I manage to mumble out.

"Likewise." We sit on the couch. "Lina, what happened in your new apartment? I haven't seen or heard of your sister either. I think you would like to tell me something." Seed always cuts to the chase, and he is capable of putting two and two together.

I don't know what to say to him. My brain is fried from piecing sentences together all night to consolidate myself. If he knows what I did then he is here to send me in exile or something worse that is probably mentioned in the rule book that I can't remember now.

He continues, "I don't like rumors, coming straight to the source is my approach. Lina, if you did something, it's best you tell me now."

"I think you know what I did." I look down and fumble with my fingers.

“Considering we monitor Bee’s status remotely, I know she suffered great trauma from that incident. But I want to know the entirety of the situation.”

“She was talking nonsense, and blaming me and you and this entire system. She was harassing me, threatening to remove Bee, and I don’t remember the rest. I pushed her out and I didn’t have a good enough reason to.”

Once the words pour out of me in an instance, the room is silent for another long moment.

“You defended yourself and your family, and now it’s time that I protect you in return for your deed. Rebellious humans cannot be stable hosts for our kind, they are a threat to harmony we work so hard for. That is why I’m not punishing you, instead I have a better offer for the overall wellbeing.”

My head remains low but I look up at him in my peripheral vision.

“No one knows this was your new apartment besides us, we’ll tell everyone it was a suicide incident. You can also go down to the laboratory to have that gruesome memory removed from your mind. That way neither you or Bee will suffer from that emotional baggage. What do you say?”

Days later everyone is still discussing the incident across the hall. Some inspectors took interviews of the nearby apartments or anyone who wanted to claim as a victim in any way. People’s speculations branched out to a possible murderer or even as far-fetched as ghosts. Seed speculates that suicide is the most plausible theory and they will close the case with that, but people’s imagination still likes to roam.

I sit on the armchair next my window, staring across at the only scarred window among the thousands of perfect ones. It will be back to normal tomorrow or the other day, as if nothing ever happened. I decide to not get lost in the conspiracy theories like everyone else. Accidents happen

and people die every day outside in the wild. Either way, the view is a breath of fresh air in a way although for all the wrong reasons. Who knows when the time will be that I have an interesting view outside of my window, especially in a lifetime where we've forgotten what sunsets look like.

My eyes remain glued outside, locked on glass shards of the large window some few meters across from mine. I look until my eyes overrule my ability to stay conscious.

Nobody knows that happened in that room that day.

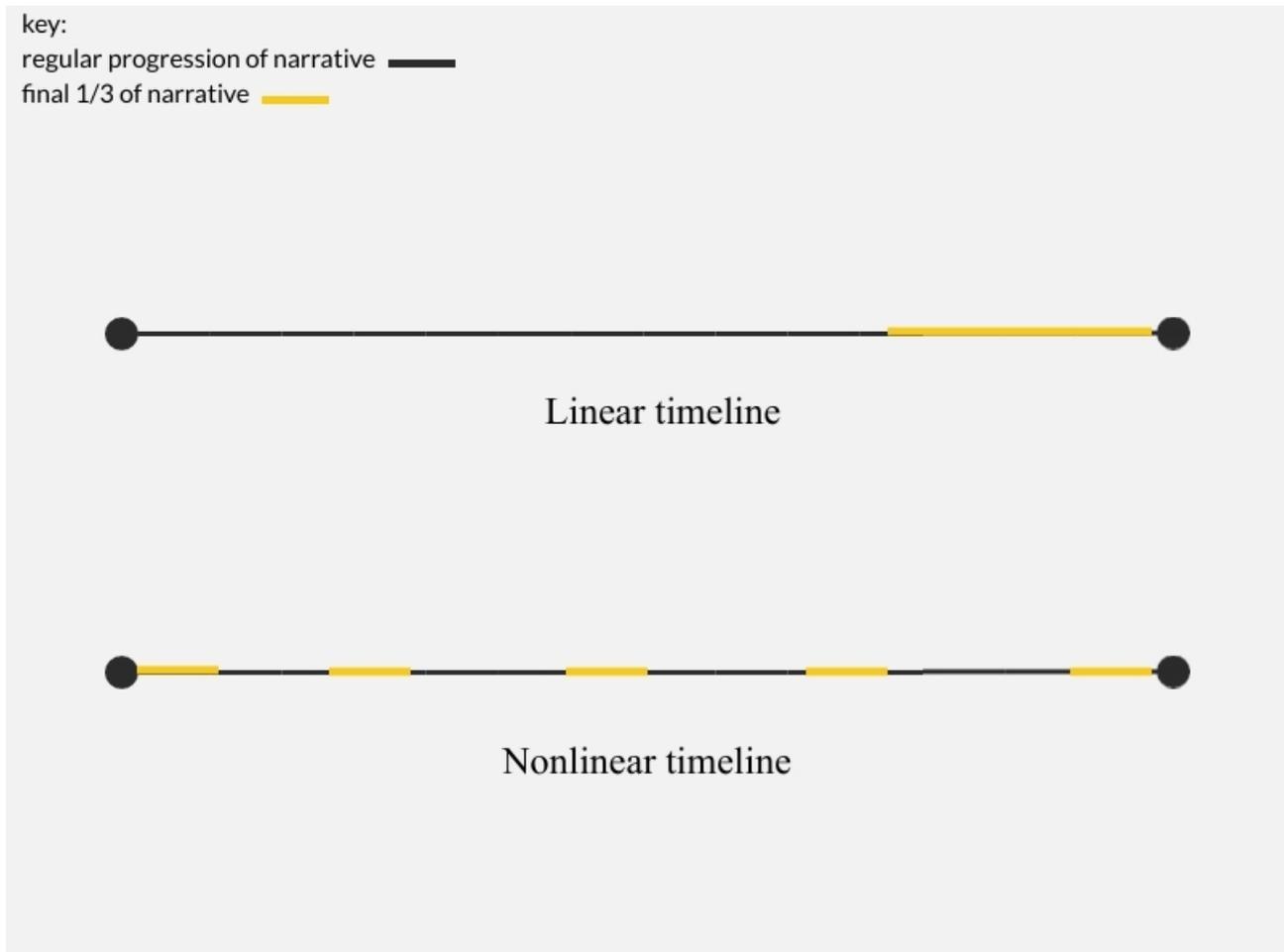
They can make educated guesses, and they do. No one knows for sure though.

Research Findings and Analysis

Non-linear narratives and storytelling differs from the linear for the basic reasoning that the emphasis of time is significantly present in the former. Whether it is implicitly or explicitly offered to the reader, time becomes a necessary plot device which emphasizes certain themes and emotions throughout the text. To a certain extent, this similar effect cannot be reached without the altering of time and chronology since it becomes the foundation of the story.

The presence of time is not as evident and emphasized in linear narratives and is often used as a secondary element of the plot. This is due to the fact that people experience time linearly in reality, which they have become accustomed to. Therefore, a reader's initial interpretation of a story is linear and when it differs from this structure, it becomes relatively unusual for human perception and draws attention to itself. Additionally, this is why non-linear narratives are often considered unnatural since they bend the laws of physics beyond what people are capable of grasping automatically (Greene, 2010). The choice of linear or non-linear storytelling is not only a stylistic choice for literature, but also it touches upon deep roots of human perception and initial instincts.

Both linear and non-linear versions of the original short story *The Seed and The Soil* consider the same climax but with varying approaches. A visual map (graph 1) of the events in both stories allows understanding of how they are apparent in each version. For clarification, the final third of the linear version is highlighted in yellow to identify how this segment is later intertwined in the non-linear version of the story. The latter jumps in time from present to future throughout, while the linear version flows from beginning to end without such disruptions.



Graph 1: Visual map of events occurring in both versions of the short story

Despite the variations in time, the non-linear version preserves the verb tenses of the original without evidently mentioning that there has been a significant jump in time. Instead, these alterations in time are offered by sections divided by asterisks. This allows the reader to perceive the story in a forward-flowing direction instead of depicting the non-linearity. The effect this has on the reader is that they perceive both plot lines of the present and future to be moving simultaneously with one another. This is otherwise known as the zigzag method as mentioned by Kim et al (2017) where the linear version of the story is broken into segments which are jumbled in a non-chronological order.

While the events of the original plot were merely juxtaposed in the non-linear version without any alterations to the writing style, the new outcome of the plot differed from the original. The linear version followed the storyline of protagonist Lina of her daily life in the safe zone

building, where she works on botany related projects to improve the quality of tree growth on a dystopian Earth. With the emergence of her missing twin sister, Avia, conflict arises between the two. Avia begins taunting her sister's entire lifestyle and trustworthiness with the new species while Lina is in the midst her life changing project and promotion. During an argument, Lina pushes Avia out the window and into the infinity pool of water where it is assumed that Avia drowned to death. Lina, in a constant state of both regret and denial accompanied by external gossip, seeks leader Seed to clean her memory of this event. Eventually, Lina becomes one of the many people wondering about the mysterious murder that she was a direct participant in and continues her life believing her sister is alive.

Differences in plot of the non-linear version includes the major concept that the story begins and ends with the repetition of the same event. This structure specifically uses the segments during which Lina herself has already removed her memory of the event and does not recall her being the murderer and the speculations of those in the building. During the entire first half of the non-linear version, there is a reoccurring mystery that the protagonist is aware of, but like everyone else, does not know the details of. As the plot progresses and details are revealed gradually, it becomes apparent that the mysterious murder in question was that committed by protagonist Lina.

The expectations of the reader for either the linear or non-linear version of the story differs from the other. This is similarly related to the dissemination of information throughout the story which is carefully chosen by the author. In the case of *The Seed and the Soil*, the concept of the murder is introduced from the beginning of the story and reminded to the reader throughout the plot while this idea is not present in the linear version until the climax approaches. While reading the linear version, the reader cannot logically assume that a murder is present in the story, while in the non-linear version this concept is embedded in the storyline earlier. This allows the idea of the murder to draw more attention to itself (Bal, 2009) and deem it as valuable for the reader to

consider while continuing the story. The emphasis of this unknown murder highlights the mysterious tone of the non-linear version compared to the linear.

The differences in emotional impact between both versions lies in the increase of suspense, mystery, and the unknown within the context of the non-linear version. Achieving this is not as closely related to the content as it is to the order of events. Taking into consideration that both stories are based identically on the same events, yet they differ in the way which they are offered to the reader. This includes what information the reader is given at certain points of the story. For example, the reader of the linear version cannot assume that a murder is a possible theme that the story will be directed towards until they reach this point in the story, while the reader of the non-linear version already has this conception from the beginning. In the latter, the reader is offered this information as a glimpse, even if they are unaware of how it ties with the plot later.

Altering the chronology of events largely impacts the emphasis and climax of the story as well. Linear narratives follow the classical structure in order from opening, rising action, climax, falling action, and conclusion while it is much more complex in the case of non-linear. These labels, to an extent, lose their initial meaning since the conclusion of the original story may be shown as the beginning of the non-linear version, but the reader does not have the knowledge at the moment that this is the conclusion in reality. Similarly, the climax in non-linear narratives is typically in the form of a revelation by combining previously apparent story threads which lead up to the whole understanding of the story arc.

For comparison of the original creative writing with international literature, Ted Chiang's fictional short story *Story of your life* is used as a valid example. The story is similarly in the science-fiction genre and written with a non-linear event pattern. Understanding the temporal characteristics of this story is complex since it transfers back and forth from the present to the future, although the future is described to the reader as the past, deceiving the reader to an extent of the timeline of events in the protagonist's life.

Story of your Life follows linguist Dr. Banks in aiding the government on a project which involves understanding the purpose of an alien species' non-hostile arrival on Earth. Banks came to the conclusion that the only way to decode the language of the aliens is to teach them English for successful communication. It is mentioned in the story that the aliens experience time non-linearly and while Dr. Banks has spent significant time with the aliens, she has begun receiving flash-forwards of her future with her ill daughter. Although, this is not revealed until the end and the entirety of the story is structured in a manner that the flash-forwards are described as flashbacks, more specifically, it allows the reader to believe that certain events have already happened in Dr. Banks' past instead of the future. At the end of the story, it is apparent that the protagonist will decide to conceive her daughter although she knows her death is inevitable in the future (Chiang, 2015).

At the root of the emotional impact in the story is the presence of the daughter who does not exist yet into the present day storyline. Considering the situation where the story was written purely in a linear version, it would begin with Dr. Banks' linguistic research and then show how her relationship grew further with a colleague, and they conceived their child, who would die of illness in her youth years later. The non-linearity evolves this story by adding emotional layers such as sorrow and anxiety. It begins by showing fragments in time where Dr. Banks has memories with her daughter who has died, allowing the reader to feel pained by the protagonist's loss, while later it is a revelation that this awaits in the future rather than in the past. The story concludes with Banks accepting this future and moving forward in the direction that the reader already anticipated (Chiang, 2015).

The emotional impact of the story is heightened since not only does the reader understand the protagonist's painful experience once, but rather acknowledges that this experience will take place once again at a time outside the limits of the written story. Therefore, it becomes more than

merely a tragic event within the climax of the story, it becomes an ongoing sorrow or anxiety that stemmed from the beginning of the story throughout, and long after it has ended.

In both the *Story of your Life* and *The Seed and the Soil*, as with many non-linear narratives, the concepts of suspense, mystery, and confusion are present. This occurs primarily due to the fact that there are several storylines occurring simultaneously which affect one another within a single story. The reader must be able to remember the flow of events in either or several storylines which are leading to their corresponding climaxes and conclusions. Additionally, non-linear narratives often disseminate information in a way which is not immediately grasped by the reader. They are offered small fragments of information, without knowing how this fits into the overall plot. With this, they become more aware that this information is valuable to recall and has significance that will be revealed once the reader is able to collect all the pieces of information to receive a full image of the story.

Non-linear narration is relatively flexible in its structure and relies on the creative freedom of the author. Despite the style of the non-linear text (analepsis, prolepsis, zigzag, and others), the grammatical element is valuable to consider as well, such as vocabulary and syntax. In the *Story of your Life*, Chiang wrote the flash-forward segments in a particular style which is not commonly used. An example excerpt from the story reads: “**I remember** a conversation **we'll have** when **you're in** your junior year of high school.” (Chiang, pg.129). The concept of time is jumbled in this single sentence where the bold text indicates a new tense. In this case, the narrator remembers a conversation which will happen in the future (unlikely to remember a future event) and refers to that event as a present one (ex.: when you're in....).

The example sentence above indicates that non-linearity may not only be applied to the plot as a whole, but on the sentence level as well. Word choice is another aspect of this sentence that fits the narrative which Chiang has decided to approach for the plot. The specific use of the phrase “I remember” indicates that the protagonist is visualizing a memory from the past since it is not

possible to remember or recall an event which has not occurred yet. From this, the reader assumes that the events transitioning throughout the story are between the past and the present, instead of the present and the future. The latter of which is revealed in the end as the reality the “memories” that are in fact flash-forwards instead of flashbacks.

The Seed and the Soil also uses transitions between the present and future in the non-linear version, although it differs from the approach used by Chiang in the *Story of your Life*. The non-linear version includes events following the murder of Avia intertwined with the present day events. Although, the verb tenses are not altered in this version to specify these events are in the future, it remains in the present tense. This creates the sense that the plot lines of the present day and future are not occurring separate from each other, but along the same axis chronologically during the present day. While Chiang consciously decided to deceive the reader, to an extent, that the events were occurring as flashbacks instead of flash-forwards, the non-linear version of the *Seed and the Soil* aimed to conceal the fact that the events being described had not yet occurred but rather were gradually progressing in the present.

To an extent, non-linear narratives are created with a certain amount of deception for the reader. This factor is more clearly present in the *Story of Your Life* due to the revelation that what the reader knew about Dr. Bank’s “memories” were technically untrue since they had not occurred yet. In *The Seed and the Soil*, the non-linear version is deceptive as well since it intertwined sections of the ending of the story throughout the beginning in the present tense, creating the illusion that these are following a straightforward chronology, while the factor of it being non-linear is apparent in the ending with the repetition.

That is necessary to allow the story to be easily accepted by the reader since linear narration is considered relatively normal both in literature and personal experience. In order for the non-linearity to be understandable and not confuse the reader, it must be expressed in a way which resembles how people are prone to perceive narratives. For this reason, the non-linear version of

The Seed and the Soil expresses the future events in the present tense since if they were written in the future tense, the emotional effect would not be similarly achieved. By being aware of the non-linearity of the story, this would diminish the impact on the reader since would already be aware of the events occurring the future, therefore decreasing the value they have on the present plot.

The question may arise as to why smaller scale expressions of non-linearity not have a similar affect on the reader. The concept of information dissemination, as previously mentioned, is valuable to consider in this case. When the details of a memory are offered to the reader, they already acquire an entire understanding of the information while when this information is offered in fragments and left incomplete, its relevancy within the context of the story increases in emphasis. The reader becomes inclined to identify the missing information of this memory rather than when it is only mentioned and then followed by other events.

Despite the factors discussed above, the non-linearity of a story does not immediately equate to it having a significant emotional impact on the reader in comparison with a linear story. This impact is highly related to the creative choices of the author in deciding the style of non-linearity which will be used in the text from the sentence level up to the entirety of the plot. While the elements may be present in a story, this does not guarantee that it will result in heightened emotional impact. For example, as Bal (2009) mentioned previously, nearly all narrative text contains a form of non-linearity in it, whether it is complex or subtle. It may be as subtle as merely recalling a past memory, or as complex as several temporal shifts within the plot.

Bakhtin's theory of the literary chronotope effectively compiles and summarizes all the previously mentioned analysis. He wrote that, "This term [space-time] is employed in mathematics, and was introduced as part of Einstein's Theory of Relativity. The special meaning it has in relativity theory is not important for our purposes; we are borrowing it for literary criticism almost as a metaphor," (Bakhtin, 2010). He viewed time as the basis of the story: "Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible," (Bakhtin, 2010). This is the case with non-

linear narration since time becomes not only an element of the setting or secondary element, it rather plays a prominent role in the expression of the story.

In the examples analyzed above, it was apparent that time is not always used as merely a setting of a story, but as a literary device which is capable of modifying the overall tone and meaning. When written effectively, it can offer an emotional storytelling outcome which is beyond the limits of stories written in linear format. The emotions are emphasized through careful and specific dissemination of information, repetition, and other stylistic approaches which the author will choose to implement in order to ensure the desired message and emotions are transmitted effectively to the reader. Each change, whether in chronology, grammatical choices, and temporality affects the plot overall. Time is closely intertwined with the story that when it is separated or altered, the story shifts as well.

Limitations and Avenues for Future Research

Non-linear narratives are not uncommon and have become a widespread form of storytelling in literature along within the cinematography and video game industries. This approach is altering the traditional perceptions of storytelling to allow its advance to new heights. Understanding and being able to implement non-linearity in literature requires multi-disciplinary skills to an extent since it requires creative capacity along with the ability to logically manipulate time and space with grammar.

The limitations that non-linear narratives propose, especially in literature, is the lack of depth and research offered on this topic. Recent and credible information on this subject is sparse or not accessible through available resources. The latest study which was found and analyzed within the scope of this paper was in 2017 by Kim et al. Although, this research is primarily concentrated on non-linear narratives within the context of films and media, rather than literature while the

terminology is similarly used in both spheres. Literary research on non-linear narratives primarily exists within the context of narratology and discourse analysis. The largest notable research and theorizing of time and space in literature was done by Bakhtin in the form of introducing the literary chronotope.

Despite this, non-linear narratives are becoming widespread in various artistic representations in contemporary times and the emotional impact it is capable of offering opposed to traditional linear storytelling has become compelling for use. As seen with both versions of *The Seed and the Soil*, both stories which resembled the same events but varying in sequence altered the perception of the entire story into two drastically different versions. The emotional impact of altering chronology, while undeniably present, is highly dependent on what the author desires to emphasize with this method.

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