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Competing Psychic Hauntings and the Fictional World Construction in Stephen King's *The Waste Lands*

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Abstract

The paper seeks to explore the constructed fictional universe of Stephen King's *The Waste Lands* where the perception of reality and dreams is blurred and an automatic ontological conflict is where the fictive world draws its basis. The experiential realities of each character is different and therefore the traditional aspect of negotiating with a singular reality is debunked by the narrative of the novel. Consequentially, the competing psychic realities that exists in the speculative universe of King, is examined through Marie-Laure Ryan's Possible World Theory. Ryan's concepts pertaining to textual actual world, alternative possible worlds, fictional recentering, accessibility relations, epistemic worlds and embedded structure of fictional universes are interlinked with concepts associated with psychosis, which are used as mere psychological concepts and not narrative theories, to describe the fractured nature of the fictive world and the characters themselves. The psychic haunting evades the fictional universe of *The Waste Lands* shows that the textual universe also simultaneously contains an alternative psychic world that comprises of incompatible histories and divided memories. The world that the readers ultimately is a complex, plural and contests reality. The psychological fragmentation of characters are transformed into a principle of fictional construction.

Keywords: Possible Worlds Theory, psychic haunting, psychosis, fictional world, fragmentation.

Introduction

Stephen King's *The Waste Lands* is organized around a basic instability: the characters do not agree about what has happened, what is happening, or what kind of reality they inhabit. This instability is explored in the novel through Jake Chambers's connection to Roland Deschain, Roland's conflicting memories of Jake, Eddie Dean's dreams of New York, Susannah's splintered consciousness, and the

increasing correspondence between different versions of places, people, and events. The problem is not just that the characters experience unusual psychological states. Rather, their experiences begin to shape the ontology of the fictional world itself.

This is especially important in the approach to the novel through the Possible Worlds Theory. Marie-Laure Ryan's model offers a vocabulary for thinking about a fictional universe as a structured system, not as a single homogeneous reality. In her formulation a textual universe has a central textual actual world (TAW) and is surrounded by alternative possible worlds (APWs). The latter may arise from characters' beliefs, wishes, dreams, fears, plans, memories and hypotheses. Thus it is Ryan that allows us to differentiate between the world presented as actual in the fiction and the alternative worlds generated by consciousness.

Ryan's model is especially helpful when *The Waste Lands*, as the novel continually muddies the waters between these worlds. She describes the recentering of the fictional as the way fiction creates a new center of actuality: the reader takes the fictional world as the center from which other possibilities are arranged in the act of reading. Ryan describes the textual universe as a system where an actual world is defined relative to alternative worlds. More importantly for King's novel, Ryan notes that fictional inhabitants themselves manipulate possible worlds through knowledge, belief, wishes, dreams and hallucinations. The world of a character can be transformed or even replaced by the reality of a dream or hallucination. This article thus introduces the concept of psychic haunting to explain the persistence of an alternate mental world when it should, by ordinary reality testing, have disappeared. A psychic haunting is when a memory, dream, perception or internally constructed reality keeps working as an active world inside the character's experience and starts affecting the actual world of the text. The haunting takes on particular significance when two or more such worlds compete for validity.

The article does not make clinical diagnoses of King's characters. Terms such as hallucination, dissociation, intrusive memory, fractured perception and psychotic-like certainty are descriptive terms used to refer to moments where the usual boundaries between inner and outer reality become blurred. Ryan's Possible Worlds Theory remains central narrative theory. The psychological vocabulary adds to this framework rather than replacing it.

Psychic Haunting and Possible Worlds

Ryan's first significant contribution to an analysis of *The Waste Lands* is the distinction she makes between actual worlds and possible worlds. A system of reality is defined in her glossary as a collection of separate worlds centered on an actual world and satellite alternative possible worlds. In the same way, she defines the textual universe as the system projected by a text, where one world may be designated actual in relation to others.

This distinction allows for a structural comprehension of psychic experience. A dream does not have to be an interruption to the narrative. In a possible-world model it can be understood as the construction of another world accessible from the mental activity of the character. A memory can also serve as a surrogate configuration of events. A hallucination can become an experienced world. The character is unaware of the ontological status of this world. A delusional belief may create a world in which the experiential truth of propositions rejected by other characters.

Ryan's notion of fictional recentering is key here. She argues that for us to read fiction we must move the center of actuality into the world presented by the fiction. But within that fictional universe, characters have their own systems of reality and possibility. Ryan notes that the dwellers of imaginary worlds employ knowledge, belief, dreams, hallucinations, wishes, plans and counterfactual thinking to construct alternative worlds. This structure is exploited over and over again in *The Waste Lands*. What seems to be a character's private psychological disturbance can become relevant to others, as another character may experience, remember or materially confirm elements of that experience. Psychic

haunting becomes, then, a problem of accessibility. When an inner world is no longer sealed off inside consciousness, it gets narrative power.

Ryan's accessibility relations offer a way to describe this process. Her model distinguishes various types of compatibility between worlds, including chronological, physical, logical, taxonomic, analytical, and linguistic compatibility. For *The Waste Lands*, logical, chronological, and physical compatibility are particularly important. The novel repeatedly poses the question of whether two seemingly incompatible histories can coexist, whether two versions of a place can both be real, and whether an event that is part of one character's experience can become materially accessible to another.

he Psychic World of Double

The clearest example of competing psychic worlds in The Waste Land is the experience of Jake. His relation to Roland is at first governed by a contradiction which seems impossible. Jake is living in two realities at the same time, one where he remembers his own death. Meanwhile, Roland recalls a world where Jake died and a world where Jake lived.

This is not presented as a common memory problem. The contradiction turns into an ontological disturbance. Roland accounts for his condition by saying that he believes "both memories are true" (King 73). This statement is important because Roland is not just saying he is uncertain. He tells the truth to both of the competing memories. Eddie, who works on ordinary binary logic, can't accept the proposition that Jake was or wasn't at the way station. Thus Roland refers to the situation as "a paradox" (King 73).

In Ryan's view, the importance of this paradox is that there are two possible arrangements of the fictional world still present in Roland's mind. One configuration has Jake die. One has him live. Normally the alternative world is meant to be subordinated to the textual actual world. But King will not make it that easy to close. The alternative still has psychological force, for Roland continues to live through both histories.

The language of division intensifies the psychological aspect. Later he finds himself as if two persons in one consciousness, each with its own memories and insisting on its own truth. Roland cannot simply put one memory into the category of falsehood and the other memory into the category of fact. The concept of broken reality-testing can be applied to read the psychological experience. The possible worlds still operate simultaneously.

What makes this a psychic haunting is the persistence of the history that is excluded. Jake's death is not merely remembered; it continues to press upon Roland's present identity. The dead Jake thus becomes an alternative psychic world that has not disappeared. Jake lives in a world where Jake died, and the world where Jake died is embedded in the world where Jake lives. Ryan's theory permits this contradiction to be understood, without reducing it to a mistake in continuity. The novel is intentionally built on a textual universe where incompatible world states exist. The haunting is produced by the ongoing availability of the counter-history.

Alternative Epistemic Configuration

The second form of psychic haunting occurs when Jake encounters Charlie the Choo-Choo. In the bookstore, Jake finds a children's book that has images that relate to things he went through in the past. By normal standards his reaction is extravagant: he becomes convinced that the apparently cheerful locomotive is hiding some other identity. The narrator calls Jake's thoughts crazy, but Jake doesn't. The novel says they "felt sane" and "felt true" (King 130). The moment is particularly important for a reading that is oriented to psychosis because it shows the distinction between external judgment and subjective certainty. A perception may be irrational to an observer but be perfectly experientially valid for the subject. The theory of possible worlds explains why this moment is important beyond psychology. Jake has constructed an epistemic world in which the apparently real identity of Charlie

the Choo-Choo is false and a covert identity is true. His conviction is an alternative epistemic setting. The issue is not only whether Jake is correct, but also how the fictional universe reacts to his belief.

King further blurs the line between delusion and perception, as objects from Jake's experience constantly gain meaning beyond his own private consciousness. Charlie the Choo-Choo is connected to the Tower, the empty lot, and the traveling between worlds. Thus, Jake's allegedly irrational perception takes part in the construction of the fictional universe. This is where the psychic haunting becomes a mode of making worlds. What is narratively important about a belief is not whether it is objectively diagnosed as right or wrong but whether it reorganizes the relations among worlds. Jake's world of mind becomes available to the larger world of text.

Roland's Divided Memory and Competing Actualities

Roland's fractured memory is the most direct expression of competing actualities. His mental state is not just memory. His current behaviour is influenced by two irreconcilable histories vying for recognition. Memory is ontological and psychological in *The Waste Lands*. Memory does not simply reproduce the past it can keep alive an alternative world. Roland's memory of Jake's death is a total net of relationships and consequences. His memory now of Jake living operates at another dimension.

This is where Ryan's model is particularly useful because it doesn't force the analyst to decide too soon which memory is "really" correct. The possible world model allows the text to retain a plurality of worlds until the narrative gives enough information to decide their relation. Ryan's talk of accessibility insists that worlds can differ, but can be connected by certain kinds of compatibility.

The language of haunting thus becomes inextricable from the structure of the fictional universe. Roland is haunted by a world that should not still exist. Yet the novel lets that world remain cognitively live. The result is a fractured subject divided internally in line with a divided fictional history. This is why Roland's experience is not to be dismissed as mere madness. The text gives structural consequences to his contradictory memories. Jake's existence is proof that Roland's psychic disturbance is a real instability in the fictional universe. The seemingly impossible has been fruitful in narrative.

Eddie's Dream and Internal Centering

Eddie Dean is another important example with his dreams and his relationship with New York. His dream experience illustrates Ryan's idea of internal re-centering better than anything. The character is able to temporarily move the focus of experience to an alternative world within a fictional universe.

Ryan explains that fictional characters can construct possible worlds through dreams and hallucinations, and these worlds can temporarily replace the reality experienced as actual. That's how Eddie's dreams work. New York is not a place that you remember. It becomes a psychic world where Eddie works through his identity, his connection to Roland's world. The importance of Eddie's dream grows when the novel makes a link between Eddie's dream and Jake's experience. The empty lot becomes a particularly potent site of convergence. Roland asks Jake to recreate his experience there because the event has become central to the ka-tet. The novel makes it clear that the Artistic Deli was in Eddie's dream, while Jake's waking reality had its absence. But both versions of the place have "enormous, talismanic power" (King 287). This constitutes a central point in the Theory of Possible Worlds. There are two versions of the same spatial location. Eddie's dream-world and Jake's experienced world are not the same, but they are accessible enough to one another to create a shared significance. The difference between them doesn't destroy their relationship. Their divergence, instead, becomes proof of overlapping worlds.

King makes dream a principle of structuring the narrative. Eddie's psychic world does not stay a solitary dream. It is part of the textual universe and it helps to create links between characters who are otherwise in different experiential realities.

The Vacant Lot, and the Overlapping of Worlds

The empty lot is the most concentrated spatial representation of King's method of world-building. It acts as a border between different realities. Its importance is just that it is approached by different characters through different experiential worlds. Does the novel directly ask whether the worlds of the characters overlap? When Roland asks Eddie if he still doubts that "our worlds overlap each other," the answer is an emphatic no (King 286). Eddie's response is embodied experience: he has physically encountered aspects of Jake's world.

This moment takes the novel beyond the psychological reading of hallucination. If a hallucination is totally private, then its ontological status may be explained as a feature of individual consciousness. But, *The Waste Lands* repeatedly turns the psychic experience inter-subjective. Characters encounter elements of each other's worlds. Ryan's conception of accessibility is therefore more useful than a simple opposition between reality and hallucination. The relevant question is: How accessible is one world to another? In the novel this accessibility is enhanced time and again. Memories are shared, dreams are tied to physical locations, characters bump into objects that are associated with the experience of another character, and incompatible histories have repercussions in the same textual universe.

The psychic haunting is in this way spatialised. The vacant lot becomes a place where alternative worlds leave traces upon each other.

Psychic Haunting and the Creation of Fictional Worlds

All the different cases considered above exhibit a consistent pattern. King doesn't put psychologically disturbed characters into an otherwise stable fictional universe. He lets their psychic experiences participate in the creation of that world. Ryan's textual universe is a modal system of a central world and alternate worlds. In *The Waste Lands*, though, the relationship between these worlds becomes oddly unstable. Textual actual world is becoming more accessible to psychic worlds. They influence characters' decisions, change relationships, correspond to physical spaces, and generate consequences that other characters must recognize.

The world-construction of the novel may thus be divided into three stages. First, a character experiences an alternate world inside themselves. Roland remembers a history in which Jake dies. Jake has unsettling visions in the book store. Eddie dreams of an alternate New York. Second, the alternative world becomes epistemically salient. The character acts upon it, remembers it, fears it, or tries to explain it away. The alternative is no longer a mental small possibility.

Thirdly, the alternative world is available to other characters or to the material structure of the fictional world. Eddie and Jake hook up at the vacant lot; Roland's conflicting memories become a problem for all of them; the ka-tet realizes their worlds overlap. Psychic haunting thus occurs when an alternative possible world refuses to remain merely possible. It continues to put pressure on the textual actual world. This also explains why memory is so crucial in *The Waste Lands*. Memory can hold onto a world that no longer works as the main reality. Roland can still remember Jake dying, yet Jake is there before him. Then the past becomes another world within the present. The psychological effect is similar to haunting, for the past is not merely remembered; it comes back as an active reality. The narrative effect is equally important, for the returning past destabilizes the organization of the fictional world.

Competing Haunted Realities

That is to say, the novel is not a single psychic haunting, but many hauntings, overlapping. The dead Jake is haunting Roland. In Jake's daily life, he is confronted with experiences that seem impossible. Eddie is haunted by New York and haunted by his dreams. Susannah's experiences are informed by competing psychic identities and perceptions. And the ka-tet as a whole is more and more haunted by the recognition that the boundaries that separate their worlds are permeable.

These hauntings compete because they don't always generate the same version of reality. Each character has an experiential center. Each one sees events through a screen of memories, beliefs, fears, expectations. Ryan's model considers these individual worlds as alternative possible worlds within the textual universe. The result is not narrative confusion but ontological multiplicity. The fictional world of the novel is enriched, because its inhabitants do not experience the same reality. Their worlds intersect without necessarily becoming the same.

The Waste Lands is suitable for a possible-worlds reading. It describes more than the geographical ruins that are scattered in the Mid World. The old relics display a universe where old systems have fallen apart and several orders of reality exist. The landscape is broken up materially, and so are the characters' consciousness. So psychic fragmentation and world fragmentation are two sides of the same coin. The world of the novel is "waste" in that the clear-cut boundaries between realities have fallen apart. What remains is fragment, memory, dream, place, identity and history, still alive and in relation.

Conclusion

The Waste Lands constructs fictional reality as a contested system of overlapping worlds. Using Marie-Laure Ryan's Possible Worlds Theory, the apparently contradictory experiences of the novel can be understood, not only as psychological anomalies but as relations between different possible configurations of the fictional universe. Ryan's constructs of fictional recentering, textual actual world, alternative possible worlds, accessibility relations, and embedded mental worlds supply a coherent narrative-theoretical framework for the interpretation of King's treatment of psychic instability. Characters in the novel are always creating other worlds of memory, dream, belief, perception, and fear. In the usual case these worlds would be subservient to the textual actual world. But, in *The Waste Lands* they are again and again made available to it.

Roland's fractured memory shows how incompatible histories persist. Jake's case illustrates how a seemingly irrational belief can become a world which is epistemically powerful. Eddie's dreams are a way of recentering himself internally and the vacant lot is a physical space of collision of different experiential worlds. The statement that the characters' 'worlds overlap,' therefore, is more than a description of friendship or shared experience. It says the ontology of the novel in basic terms. In this sense, psychic haunting is the lingering of another experiential world in the textual universe, once apparently excluded from actuality. A haunting is at its strongest when the other world has access to the textual real world. King's achievement is in not entirely resolving the resulting uncertainty. Instead, he puts uncertainty to work for him.

The psychological instability of the characters thus becomes a device of fictional construction. Their broken perceptions don't just mirror a broken world; they help build one. Memories create competing histories, dreams create alternative spaces and hallucination-like perceptions question the borders of material world. The fictional universe of *The Waste Lands* is thus constructed through an ongoing negotiation between actual and possible.

The novel's psychic hauntings are thus "competing," for no one experiential reality is fully sovereign. Each world has its own claims to truth, and each can be opened up to another. What seems at first sight to be a psychological disturbance can in this way become an ontological event. In *The Waste Lands* the haunted mind is one of the major sites through which the fictional world itself is produced.

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