What Begins, What Ends:

A Discussion of foreshadowing in the novel *S.* by Doug Dorst, J.J. Abrams

and the Chinese classical novel *Dream of the Red Chamber* by Cao Xueqin

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In the novel *S.*, the author uses frequent foreshadowing. In the first chapter, “What Begins, What Ends”, hints at events that occur further on in the book. In one scene boys hide in the shadow as S. passes by foreshadowing the relationship between S. and the agents. The marginalia between Jen and Eric in *Ship of Theseus* provide hints to relationships between S. and Sola.

Xueqin Cao also uses foreshadowing in the Chinese classical novel, *Dream of the Red Chamber*. Cao frames the tale with a mystical story about a sentient Stone begging a Buddhist monk and a Taoist priest to bring it to see the world. Several events in the novel correspond to the details and text in that frame story. The main character, Baoyu Jia, is led by the Goddess of Disenchantment and wanders through the Illusory Land of Great Void. While he ventures, he is shown a record and destiny of the twelve foremost beauties in Baoyu’s province. The record and destiny that are interpreted through twelve Chinese poems actually hint at the fate of various female characters in the novel. Comparing the two books, Dorst and Abrams use scenes and the marginalia while Cao uses scenes, poetry, and multi-meaning phrases or terms to foreshadow. Both have atypical story formats. They are written as though there isn’t just a singular story, but more like stories surrounding stories: a story within a story. This paper will examine what foreshadowing is and why and how it is use by comparing how the two books apply foreshadowing. How does story format support foreshadowing and what it helps achieve.

Foreshadowing is a technique by which the author uses certain devices such as using scenes and objects to preview what is to come in the book. The use of foreshadow usually appears early on in the books. The author may directly or indirectly hint what is to come. Sometimes, the foreshadowing provides misleading information. This is called *red herring*.

*S.* starts off with the “Translator’s Note and Foreword of *Ship of Theseus*”. The author inserts multiple references that will be constantly discussed throughout the book. For example, the translator of *Ship of Theseus*, F. X. Caldeira, writes about the potential candidates of the author of *Ship of Theseus*, V. M. Straka. Eric and Jen, curious about who Straka was, organized a list of the candidates and possible crimes that Straka has committed. Throughout the book, when Eric and Jen exchange ideas about Straka and his identity, these candidates reappear. Caldeira is writing that hints at the possibly close relationship between her and Straka.

Chapter One starts out as S. appears in a city unknown to him and wanders around. The whole first chapter can be considered foreshadowing, pointing out many scenes and themes that appear in the book. The thematic similarity of S. wandering around, then at the tavern, and the entire *Ship of Theseus* story seems to function like a musical fugue, in which an introductory theme is played in a single voice and this theme is repeated by various other voices throughout.

S. wanders in “a city of ancient and flawed geometry.” (P.4) This correlates to the ambiguity of S.’s identity and his entire journey. The ship that S. sails on, the floating stars above, and the waterspout storm in Chapter Two, all revert to the description of the city S. started in.

The ambiguity of S.’s identity was one of the constant topics in the first chapter. “He does not know whether his is such a person, though. He does not know whether he has ever been here before. He does not know why he is here.” (P.4) S. questions his identity throughout the book, as Jen and Eric ponder on V.M. Straka’s identity starting from the Translator’s Note. S. points out three possible connections to his early life: an ink-stained paper with an ornate S-shaped symbol in his coat pocket, a tiny black orb in his trouser pocket, a vague but terrifying sense-memory of falling from a great height. (P.6) The S. symbol not only is revealed to be his name, but also is marked on places that he visited throughout his journey. The tiny black orb, which S. describes might be a pebble or piece of ancient and petrified fruit, might have been a piece of obsidian from the Obsidian Island, or a grape from Vévoda’s Château vineyard. The orb prefigures S.’s trip to Obsidian Island and Vévoda’s Château. The sense of falling foretells the drop S. made with Corbeau while escaping the Detectives in the painting cave. All are objects or events that occur in the future. Why does S. have them in Chapter One? They not only point to the future, but also make readers skeptical of S.’s past. The title of this chapter “What Begins, What Ends” and this quote that is emerging through the city, “What begins at the water shall end there, and what ends there shall once more begin” (P.12), both provide the possibility of S. somehow reliving what has already happened.

Another scene from the first chapter that uses foreshadowing is the distrustful exchange between the barrel organ owner and the immigrant grinder. (P.7~9) This exchange mirrors the relationship between Vévoda and the factory workers in the city of B---. The organ owner’s sons’ pursuit of the monkey is like Vévoda’s Detectives trying to capture and kill S., even though both attempts prove futile.

In another scene, three boys throw bricks and rocks at the streetlights hinting at the relationship between S. and Vevoda that is elaborated further in *Ship of Theseus*. (P.11~12) The boys hid when S. caught up to them and once S. left, they reemerged. The boys can be seen as Agents of Vevoda and they hide from S. because he spoils their plans. It foreshadows the Interlude chapter, where S. is an assassin hunting down Agents of Vevoda.

Following that scene, a harbormaster encounters S. and tries greeting him. S. ignores the harbormaster and continues walking. (P.13~14) This cold and indifferent encounter is a preview to Winter City, where nobody interacts with each other and each minds one’s own business. The people in Winter City are able to see each other and live in the same environment, but they live as if they are in isolation. The harbormaster’s rant, “What ever happened to comradeship and civility, the friendly hello, the small talk of a shared city”, also corresponds to S.’s thoughts of interacting with others while he was in Winter City.

*Dream of the Red Chamber* starts off with a mythical story about a stone that was abandoned by a goddess, Nuwa, when she was mending the heavens. The stone encounters a Buddhist monk and a Taoist priest and hopes to be brought into the world of humans. His wanting to experience the life of humanity being fulfilled, the Stone eventually becomes the luminescent jade that the main protagonist, Baoyu Jia, was born with. (P.2~7)

Baochai Xue, one of Baoyu’s first cousins, also has a golden locket that was given to her by a Buddhist monk during her childhood. Baoyu’s jade and Baochai’s locket both have inscriptions and seem to complement each other. This provides an early hint to the predetermined marriage of the two.

The other main character, Daiyu Lin, is also an incarnation of a mythic thing. In the frame story, there is a magical flower that Baoyu’s previous being had watered. The flower was born as a human to repay Baoyu with tears. This suggests why Daiyu was such an emotionally fragile, sickly young girl that also was beautiful in a tragic, atypical way. (P.7~10)

In the early chapters, *Dream of the Red Chamber* provides several poems that foreshadow the events that happen later in the book. The poem in Chapter Two provides what the following chapter is about, and how the whole story is likely to end with: the fall of the majestic Rongguo House. (P.23) The poem’s first line uses the metaphor of playing Chinese chess to depict the unpredictability of events happening through the House. “Fainted scents, finished tea, ended chess tournaments” point out the yet to come falling of the House. The last two lines convey that Lengzixing could already see past the current image of the family’s luxury and fame and could tell that the family was on the fate of declining.

Poetry is also the vessel for foreshadowing in “the record and destiny of the twelve foremost beauties,” shown to Baoyu during his adventure into the Illusory Land of Great Void. (P.84~88) The poems with images hint at on the fate of twelve different female characters in the book. For example, the poem that starts with “kan po” is foretelling the Xichun’s destiny of becoming a monk. The poem’s first two lines, uses the Chinese characters “Xi” and “Chun” to point out that this poem was Xichun’s destiny and throughout the poem, various Buddhist temple items are described. The last two lines depict a poor girl laying by herself next to the Buddhist statues and lights.

*Dream of the Red Chamber* used the early chapters described by the narrator as “not the main story” but background information for readers. They rush to what is happening and look at the family from a different perspective. The mythic story about the stone that eventually turned into the jade that Baoyu had in his mouth at birth, and the story about the flower that was watered by Baoyu’s previous life, both were written as frame stories to the main story about the family.

Cao provides numerous clues to the major events and destiny of the characters in these early parts of the book. His approach entices the reader to continue reading. It also to emphases several core ideas of the book. Cao’s family used to be like the wealthy and famous Rongguo House, yet to his generation, his family came to decline and ended up miserably. This book may have been an autobiography as well as a story to alert not only those that are in similar states but also the empire. Mentioning the relationships between the characters and the final destiny early to the readers serves as a pointer to what to keep in mind while reading.

In contrast, *S.*, uses not only the first chapter, but also the marginalia between Jen and Eric, and the footnotes written by Caldeira to provide hints to what may happen further on in the book. The first chapter gives us the main sense of the story’s atmosphere surrounding uncertainty. The various scenes that S. encounters while wandering foreshadow different major events or prominent relationships between the characters. The notes of Jen and Eric with different ink color based on when they wrote also provide some hints to the relationship between Straka and Caldeira, and certain details that are stated further in the book. Caldeira’s footnotes also give information about other works by Straka and codes embedded into them.

Due to the special format *S.* is written in, each reader may have a different method of reading it. If one reads through every material on the pages, including the context of *Ship of Theseus*, the footnotes, and the marginalia by Jen and Eric, one may catch phrases or ideas early on that will reappear and be meaningful later in the book, since a portion of Jen and Eric’s notes is written after they had already read the book. In contrast, if one decides to first finish *Ship of Theseus*, and then look back at all the note exchanges between Jen and Eric, one wouldn’t spot these phrases and ideas. An example of an idea that is embedded in the marginalia is the relationship between S. and Sola, Straka and Caldeira. If the reader goes through the marginalia early on, he or she will learn about the relationship development not only between Jen and Eric but also between S. and Sola or Straka and Caldeira.

The foreshadowing in *S.* serves several purposes. It provides hints to what happens in the latter parts of the book, thus enticing the reader to continue reading. It makes a never-ending, continuously repeating spiral effect for the story, *Ship of Theseus*. Has S. actually experienced everything that was written in the book when he arrived at the city in Chapter One but completely couldn’t recall what happened? The items S. had with him at the start, the paper with S., the black orb, and the sense memory of falling, all happened later in the story. Does the mention of these things early on in the story spur readers to find out what they meant or hint that his future was just a replay of his past?

Both books used foreshadowing to emphasize the main themes. In *S.*, these are identity, uncertainty, beginning and ending, good and evil all inserted into the first chapter. In *Dream of the Red Chamber*, the first few chapters constantly refer to true cruel reality of the declining majestic family and the sad, tragic fate of the characters in the book. The author uses this technique in order to structure and preview what the stories are about, giving readers a better view on the greater theme and the significant topics in the book.

It is interesting that both books have “questionable” endings believed to be written not by the same author that had wrote the earlier parts of the books. The last chapter of *Ship of Theseus* is believed to be written by Caldeira, while the last 40 chapters of *Dream of the Red Chamber* was believed to be written by Gao E. Due to the inconsistence of writing, both books have endings other than what the original author might have written. This has also resulted in some details brought up earlier in the books to be misleading, and eventually incorrect. In the record and destiny of the twelve foremost beauties, Xifeng Wang was predicted in the poem to be divorced by her husband in the end. Instead, she died after the family’s asserts were seized by the government. This misleading foreshadow, due to the switch of author, is a red herring. In S., the readers might pick up signs such as the parallel of time leading to aging difference and always separating after meeting that S. and Sola may never be together, but in the end of *Ship of Theseus,* S. and Sola leave together. The footnotes and marginalia mention that due to the Havana incident, Caldeira included her writing for the last chapter. Also, the author of S., Dorst, posted on his twitter Straka’s original ending, in which Sola and S. are ultimately separated and unable to be together. The rewrite of the original ending by Caldeira also created red herrings in the book.

Rereading both books is encouraged. Each time rereading, one can spot the foreshadowing and get different insights and perspectives to the books. In S., there are plenty of scenes that could signify more abstract concepts or meaningful ideas that are explained later and these insights are likely overlooked during the reader’s preliminary attempt. An example of this is Chapter One, “What Begins, What Ends”. In *Dream of the Red Chamber*, there are plenty of details early on that are hard to understand or isn’t explained enough, These details require knowledge after reading further on the book. The mythical stories about the stone abandoned by Nuwa and the flower being watered at first glance seem random but after reading about Baoyu and Daiyu, the stories make more sense and meaning. By rereading the mythical stories, readers can grasp certain details that explain what happens later on in the book. Not only is foreshadowing noticed by rereading, but it also sheds light to details and ideas that one might not notice at first.

Foreshadowing has created more complex layers for both books. It intrigues the reader to read and provides some predictions to the events later in the books. In both books, the atypical formats have helped made foreshadowing more flexible rather than just applying it in the main structured stories. The change of authors in latter parts of the books has caused different endings, thus, creating red herrings. To fully discover and appreciate the foreshadowing in these books, rereading is preferred. Going through the scenes and thoughts early on could help explain the events and help build up new insights to these complexly structured and detailed books.

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