Lexie Lessing

The Reinvention of Identity Through Literature

Throughout life we are given the opportunities to travel down various paths and we can choose how we create and recreate ourselves. People are often defined by who they are, but many people struggle with their identity. Identity, or the lack thereof, often drives motivation and the will to reinvent the self. Identity can be studied through many facets of life, from literature discussing the themes of identity to research on the psychology of self to analysis of how particular rituals may hold certain connections to a person. While people cannot control what happens to them, they can control how they react to different situations and the complexity of identity and discovery often draws upon struggles with solitude, resolve, and the cyclical nature of life.

Many of these themes are exemplified by the characters in *S.* by J.J. Abrams and Doug Dorst and the character of Zachary Solomon in Dan Brown’s *The Lost Symbol*. The perception of good versus evil is a framework in which one can identify the motivation for reinvention after rebirth within these novels. The psychological aspect behind motivation and rebirth can lend insight into why the various characters act as they do.

The idea of rebirth is present within both works and ties into the central *S.* quote, “what begins at the water will end there, and what ends there shall once more begin,” (Abrams and Dorst 12). S. and Zachary Solomon share many parallels through their various rituals and perception of the greater good, but they are also opposites in their motivation and self-assurance.

Weaved into the three narratives of *S*. imagined by J.J. Abrams and brought to life by Doug Dorst, is the struggle with identity and the theme of reinvention. At the start of *Ship of Theseus*, S. awakens in an unknown world. He emerges into the story with no memories except a feeling of falling, a piece of paper with an ornate *S* drawn on it, and a small hard object similar to a pebble or dried fruit. With no other clues to his identity, he finds himself on a ship and questioning his purpose. He is left to his own thoughts and uncovers his innate identity as he encounters many different experiences. He notices his natural inclination to act in response to different situations, but due to his lack of prior knowledge, he is presented with the option of following those inclinations or becoming a new person. One example is when Pfeifer is shot and a stoic Stenfalk is surrounded by the Detectives. S. realizes he is not a fighter and is incompetent to act in a heroic manner. This is an opportunity for S. to diverge from who he might have been in the past, but he fails to take this chance. He is unaware of whether he is reinventing himself as new person, or as exactly the same coward he once may have been.

The idea of identity is clear and the idea that S. needs to discover this on his own is also clear. When he goes to El H\_\_\_, Osfour tells S. while he knows he is the man who escaped Vévoda, he does not know who S. was. Osfour reminds S. that his identity is his problem alone to solve, and that no one else can decide who one is. In the first iteration of his character, S. just lets everything occur to him. While he questions his purpose, he simply accepts where he is in every situation. The only initiative he shows is when he is alone with his thoughts, but even here he shows no resolve in trying to find a purpose or a solution. He has no perception of what is essentially right or wrong. Only when he discovers the secrets of the orlop does he experience another rebirth, becomes part of the ship, and embraces his job as an assassin of Vévoda’s detectives.

When S. enters the orlop, he goes through both a physical and mental transformation. He sits down and begins to write on the paper. As a result of the magic of the mysterious ship itself, S. is able to write fluidly, with all his memories and stories flowing out of him. As part of the tradition, S. is then pinned down by the crew and Maelstrom uses a fishhook to sew his mouth shut. The sewing of the lips is a paradoxical ritual: the sewing physically limits words in speech, yet it also symbolizes the boundless ability to write. This ritual begins a rebirth for S., as if he is awakened by the flow of memories, he then embraces his job as an assassin. He assumes his identity or purpose to kill Vévoda’s detectives and reduce the injustice and death the latter is causing. It is clear that he believes he is killing for the overall good. Throughout the Interlude, the reader can see how by embracing his identity as an assassin, S. appears to be fluid and mysterious in identity to everyone else. It is only after the battle at the Territory and the destruction of the ship and the death of Maelstrom and the crew that S. falters in his purpose. When his valise is destroyed during this event, it is clear that S. has still been struggling with his identity, relying solely on the objects given to him. He felt as if everything that tied him to his new identity as an assassin was suddenly gone.

There is nothing. The woman who could save him, who could explain, is gone. His other selves are gone. His stitches are gone. His poisons are gone. His pages are gone, lost underwater or turned to ash. He has only this empty vessel of himself. He is a ghost. (372-373)

This shows the decay of S.’s identity and confidence. He had only found his identity when anchored to objects. Without those objects and his rituals of lip sewing and writing, S. becomes entirely lost and struggles with who he is. After this moment, he becomes a third version of himself, only a shell of a person in Winter City.

The third version of S. arrives in the Winter City without any memories of how he got there, but he once again accepts his place without question. Instead of fighting to find the ship or Sola again, he chooses to view life as an empty place where “no one there was part of *anyone* else’s world. They all occupied the same space but did not occupy it together,” (376). S. needs others to motivate him and without any obvious purpose, he becomes entirely apathetic. In a psychological study on the effect of migration on the reinvention of self conducted by Ward, there is the assertion that, “a sense of ‘who you are’ is essential to all humans. If individuals do not have a clear sense of self or identity, they will not have a clear sense of their motives, goals, attitudes, values or set of social roles which are all part of their identity” (Ward 351). S. has no idea who he is in the Winter City and has no motivation to return to his work as an assassin or to really do anything. Without the objects of the black stitches, his poisons, or his ship, S. is lost and does not have this sense of self that is critical in finding motivation and purpose. While Ward’s research established that changing environments correlates strongly with increased confidence and independence, the fictional character of S. struggles to accept new situations. His weak perception of identity leads to a lack in the sense of belonging and he recedes within himself. S. is only awoken towards the end of *Ship of Theseus*, when S. finds Sola.

When the apathetic S. finds Sola in the Winter City, he comes to a revelation that because he has only focused on his missing past, he has not made an effort to make a connection with his present identity. When he asks Sola about who he is and she replies, “What you’re asking, I think, is who you *were*, which is relevant only if you care deeply about it. Do you?” (Abrams and Dorst 394). The mystery of his past is no longer important to him when he has the present to create his own identity. S. who often projected outward realizes that he has the ability to reinvent who he is from within and without the help of others. After this point, S. goes through a fourth reincarnation, deciding that despite his actions or choice to kill Vévoda and his men, these actions will not matter since there will always be a cycle of good and evil. This motivates S. to start a new life by returning to the water with Sola and stop pursuing his prior perception of killing for good. Although this may be seen as recognition and not rebirth, S. readjusts his life’s purpose and therefore starts on a new path of life, finally embracing that he can control how he reacts to events and his own life.

Similar to S. in *Ship of Theseus*, the character of Zachary Solomon in Dan Brown’s *The Lost Symbol* goes through a series of rebirths. Unlike S., many of these rebirths were deliberate and Zachary was very aware of his self-assured purpose in every iteration of himself. He knew each distinct person he was and who he would be in his next rebirth when he was no longer content. He let his reimagined identities dictate his motivation and goals throughout his character arc. There was a clear succession of new births, with the final Mal’akh referring to his earlier selves as prior lives. He began as the troubled, rebellious, and hedonistic Zachary Solomon who ended up in a Turkish jail for his debauchery and drug-related misdemeanors. After escaping prison, he became the new Andros Dareios, or “wealthy warrior” in Greek . Andros had an entirely new outlook on life, saying “*I am reborn,”* making himself into “a perfect male speciman,” (Brown 223-224). Through his physical transformation with black market growth hormones and intellectual transformation through his extensive reading, he discovered his own power and his ultimate destiny.

Zachary Solomon’s ultimate self-proclaimed identity materialized as the character Mal’akh. When Andros became determined to find the Masonic Pyramid that had once been offered to him as a teenager, he left Greece and in an attempt to attain the pyramid, he killed his grandmother and was shot by his father who did not recognize him as Andros. After plunging into an icy ravine, he escaped and decided to reinvent himself as Mal’akh, which means “angel” in Hebrew (Beyer 23). He began to transform his body again to hide the scars, decorating it with tattoos and removing his testicles to move towards androgyny as “*Gods have no gender,”* (Brown 268). Similar to S., Mal’akh physically changed his body and went through a cleansing ritual daily to prepare himself for his ultimate destiny. The ritual became central to his identity and without it, Mal’akh would lose who he was. Mal’akh, however, had a very clear idea of who he was and was willing to go to any means to improve himself. He even stated that “*Every spiritual metamorphosis is preceded by a physical one,”* showing his belief that physical identity was closely connected to spiritual identity (Brown 268). S. would also connect to this idea because he felt that the physical sewing of the lips was essential to who he was and his emotional well-being and memories. Also similar to how S. became physically elusive when on a mission, Mal’akh also created the persona of Dr. Christopher Abaddon to infiltrate the high level of the Free Masons and to gain access to Peter Solomon and the secret of the pyramid. Mal’akh did not hesitate to change his physical appearance if he did not feel it coincided with his current identity. In the book *Reinvention* by Anthony Elliot, the author stated, “If you do not enjoy your current lifestyle or do not like how you presently look, discard and redesign,” (Elliot 6). This is exactly what Solomon did, by going through physical transformations to echo each new identity he took as both Andros and Mal’akh. Both S. and Solomon had the ability to reshape who they were, both in physical and emotional identity, Solomon was just more proactive.

Mal’akh’s actions are also very similar to the assassin iteration of S. in *Ship of Theseus*, but their motivations are fundamentally different. Mal’akh showed no hesitation in murdering someone if it helped him move towards his purpose of obtaining the pyramid. To the greater public, this may have been perceived as evil, as it was perceived by Professor Langdon and his allies, but Mal’akh believed it was for good just as S. saw his job as an assassin. They had similar actions, but S. was portrayed as the protagonist against Vévoda, while Mal’akh was perceived as the antagonistic villain. Regardless of what “side” they were on, both S. and Mal’akh killed people without thought about the future implications or consequences of their actions. People often are motivated by what they identify is most beneficial at the moment, but are unaware of or choose to overlook the future consequences of those actions (Oyserman). S. continues to kill without thought over which side he is on or the damage that follows him as Vévoda attempts to kill S.. When his explicit purpose and means were removed from him, S. crumbled. Mal’akh kills without realizing the trail he is leaving and feels he is above the legal consequences for his kidnapping and murders. There is very clear motivation behind Mal’akh’s actions, even stating that “*Some must die that others must live”* (Brown 325). He is willing to go to whatever measures to obtain the pyramid and the secret it holds. If there is a conflict, he does not sit idly by, he acts. S. lacked the self-drive, and was blindly following orders as an assassin until the end of the novel when he chose not to kill Vévoda. At that point, his motivation shifted towards the future when he could see the cycle of good and bad and decided that his present actions would not help him in the future because there will always be a new evil.

The cycle of good and evil can also be compared to the cycle of rebirth. Good and evil always appear in new forms and people must identify with their side and react to what they think is right or what they are motivated to do. In both *Ship of Theseus* and *The Lost Symbol,* this cycle is restarted by interactions with water. The quote “what begins at the water will end there, and what ends there shall once more begin,” exemplifies the idea of rebirth at the water. In *Ship of Theseus*, S. emerged from the water in the Old Quarter without memories and as a new person. While he specifically was not reborn at every interaction with the water, he witnessed this cycle often with others aside from himself. An example of this is when he decided to jump off the cliff with Corbeau and escape the Detectives. While her death was an obvious end, this submersion was also symbolic for the end of rebellion in response to Vévoda’s bombing of the wharf and disappearance of workers. This fall to the water also signified a new birth when S. emerged and found that the ship was there waiting for him. This began a new start for him. The presence of the ship was often found at the start of a new cycle, thus connecting his identity strongly to it. While he was not comfortable on the ship, it was where he found refuge and safe haven. The ship was an extension of water in *Ship of Theseus* and even though it disappears before S. goes to Winter City, it once again returns when S. decides to take a new path with Sola and not kill Vévoda. The theme of water and its renewing abilities was also present in *The Lost Symbol.* Zachary Solomon went through two clear rebirths, both having to do with the water. When Solomon escaped from prison after feeling abandoned and rejected by his father, he essentially killed “Zachary Solomon” and fled to the water to create a new self. He then found himself in the Greek Isles and found a new purpose when cliff diving. When he emerged from the water, he became aware that adrenaline would be his new addiction and began his life as Andros. When Andros became unhappy with his life, he found new purpose in his quest to obtain the Masonic Pyramid. The life of Andros was ended when he was shot by his father into an icy ravine and his life as Mal’akh began once he emerged. Mal’akh also killed someone through drowning them, ending that life cycle and feeding into his mission for the pyramid. Mal’akh also met his final end in a metaphorical sense of water. When the helicopter broke the ceiling, glass rained down on Mal’akh, killing him on the altar. Symbolically water ends his life, thus starting the cycle over for the rest of the characters in *The Lost Symbol.*

Throughout *Ship of Theseus*, S. was essentially alone. He was always in his own thoughts and never formed true connections to those around him. While Maelstrom and the crew were often present in his life, S. felt no real connection to them until they were all killed. He lived along-side them or worked for others in the effort to beat Vévoda, but he never formed a real relationship. He was ultimately alone in every new environment. The only consistent person in his life was Sola, but she was intangible for the majority of the novel. She was an idea and a dream who was always one step ahead of him. Not until the end of the novel does S. come to his realization about his purpose so that he could make a connection to her.

Similar to S., Solomon was often alone and lived for himself. As a teenager he acted out and he ultimately felt rejected by his father when he was left in the prison. Then as Andros, even though he was surrounded by women, he only used them to satisfy his sexual thirst and did not make any connections. He lived within his own mind, creating a world where his morals depended on his motivation and goals. He isolated himself further when he killed his grandmother and kidnapped his father, ultimately believing that he died alone. It was only after it was too late that his father realized it was his son. After Mal’akh’s death, his father mourned not only the loss of his son but also that his son felt so isolated that he went to these measures. Both S. and Mal’akh perceived their own isolation because they both felt and identified that they were alone.

The themes represented through the characters in *S.* by J.J. Abrams and Doug Dorst parallels many of the ideas present in Dan Brown’s *The Lost Symbol*. The character of Mal’akh encounters many of the same struggles with identity, solitude, and the cyclical nature of life and rebirth as the characters do in *S.* The idea of rebirth is present within both works and ties into the central *S.* quote, “what begins at the water will end there, and what ends there shall once more begin.” The rebirth of Zachary Solomon into Andros Dareios, and finally into Mal’akh is similar to S. appearing without any memories, then becoming a lip-sewed assassin, and then indifferent to good or evil by the end. Throughout these rebirths, water was a major element, with both experiencing solitude on the ocean and in their lives. Andros found a new beginning in cliff diving and after being shot into the icy ravine, and ultimately met his end as glass rained down on him like water. In *Ship of Theseus*, S. always returned to the water and at the end with found himself starting a new life Sola. There is also the idea of good versus evil throughout both books. While S. and Mal’akh appear to be on opposite sides, they both kill people for what they perceive as the greater good. The expression of thoughts through tradition and body mutilation is also a commonality with Mal’akh’s tattoos and the sewing of the lips in *Ship of Theseus*. There is an evident struggle with identity with both S. and Solomon and through the cycle of rebirth, they define their characters as being competent or weak and readers can see the evolution they reinvent for themselves.

Works Consulted:

Beyer, Jr., Thomas R.. 33 Keys to Unlocking The Lost Symbol : A Reader's Companion to the Dan Brown Novel. : Newmarket Press, 2009. Ebook Library. Web. 09 Oct. 2015. <<http://biblio.middlebury.edu/record=b2867844~S2>>.

Brown, Dan. The Lost Symbol: A Novel. New York: Doubleday, 2009. Print.

Elliott, Anthony. Reinvention. Florence: Taylor and Francis, 2013. Ebook Library. Web. 12 Oct. 2015. <<http://middlebury.eblib.com.ezproxy.middlebury.edu/patron/FullRecord.aspx?p=1114682&echo=1&userid=hmQBUDKzrjjhOWb7lphsIg%3d%3d&tstamp=1445832225&id=43F4BD48C71A9DAD5F2C864E5CC0466693731E66>>.

Mystimus. "Thoughts On "S"" *Thoughts On S*. N.p., n.d. Web. 09 Oct. 2015. <https://whoisstraka.wordpress.com/>.

"The Lost Symbol." *Wikipedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, 3 Oct. 2015. Web. 09 Oct. 2015. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\_Lost\_Symbol>.

Ward, Catherine, and Irene Styles. "Lost and found: Reinvention of the Self Following Migration." *Journal of Applied Psychoanalytic Studies* 5.3 (2003): 349-67. *ProQuest.* Web. 12 Oct. 2015. <<https://ill.middlebury.edu/illiad/MDY/illiad.dll?Action=10&Form=75&Value=456104>>.

Oyserman, Daphna. Pathways To Success Through Identity-based Motivation. Cary: Oxford University Press, 2015. Ebook Library. Web. 12 Oct. 2015.

"S. (Dorst Novel)." <i>Wikipedia</i>. Wikimedia Foundation, 26 Sept. 2015. Web. 12 Oct. 2015. &lt;<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/S._(Dorst_novel)&gt>;.

Swift, Jonathan. Gulliver’s Travels. Xist Publishing, 2015. Print.

Wrobel, Szymon. Deferring the Self. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang GmbH, Internationaler Verlag der Wissenschaften, 2013. Ebook Library. Web. 12 Oct.

2015. <<http://biblio.middlebury.edu/record=b3603428~S2>>.

"Zachary Solomon." *Dan Brown Wiki*. N.p., n.d. Web. 9 Oct. 2015. <http://danbrown.wikia.com/wiki/Zachary\_Solomon>.