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Scholars Communicate Meaning

Beyer

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You Love, Then You Lose, Then You Die

Dragging her feet through the hallways of her high school, a young, petit, brunette, girl, Becky, makes her way to her next obstacle: geometry class. As she scurries past the stiff blue lockers and red coated jocks, her imagination plunges into an expansive mystery full of philosophical paradoxes, unimaginable skyscrapers, and microchip technology. In this world she parades from one symposium to the next, delivering stellar speeches.

However, as the bell rings and Becky must brush past the hard wooden door frame and rushes of students, she returns to the harsh reality she has been forced to become accustomed to. Waiting for her on her desk in the back corner of the room is a sheet of paper face down with a red ink reflection of a D bleeding through. She gently grabs the corner of the paper between her thumb and her forefingers, quietly slipping the paper into her folder.

To Becky, her view of her personality varies greatly from others perception of it. In Western culture, people are constantly fighting a battle between how they see themselves, and how their community sees them. Crucial to our view of self, identity shapes people’s views and helps to determine their actions, yet what makes up their identity remains vague. *Ship of Theseus* by V.M. Straka, explores the way identity functions in one’s life by completely eliminating S’s identity, thus showing the reader humanity’s need for a sense of self even though identity does not make philosophical sense. Ultimately, the narrator explores whether one’s life has meaning and argues that a loving relationship is essential to humans and, while hard to do, should be their number one concern.

Through the narrator’s use of symbolism, S proves identity a human necessity. Everything has been left behind for S “so these sorry trousers are his only possession, his only connection to a stolen past” (70). Clothes, a human necessity to survival, used along side S’s “stolen past” communicates identity’s necessity to life. Just as without clothes, S would be naked, without a past he has been stripped of his personality, and left as a man without an essence. S eventually recognizes that “really, his task in living is a simple one: survive long enough to find out who you are” (183). All that truly matters to his existence is giving it an essence, or an identity so to speak. Thus, as S’s most important task, identity is underscored as a necessity, not just a desire.

Without an identity, S cannot function properly. S wants to live in a world where “he could figure out… the person he was, and he could choose what to do instead of simply doing it” (71). Two different decision making processes go into the thousands of decisions humans make every day, cognitive control and value based decisions. Cognitive Control, which makes decisions based on memory, reasoning, and problem solving, gives humans our “gut feeling” (Szalavaitz). Without an identity, S lacks this cognitive control, robbing him from the basic human function of decision-making.

In his current state, S has been forced into an inner isolation, having lost all of his connections to others. S travels as a “man without a past, sailing in a strange sea in a world where the stars have come loose in the firmament” (47). Important to life for centuries, stars have been used to guide sailors, explain stories, and light up the night. However, to S, the stars have lost all of this, symbolizing his loss of guidance in the world. Tracing all the way back to ancient Mesopotamia, constellations have been seen in the sky and have continued to be discovered and discussed in Ancient China, Greece, Egypt, and now the West as well (James). Globally recognized, constellations form in many people’s minds in this world because of their past experiences with stars, but if citizens in these cultures lost their past they would not recognize any of these features. This idea highlights S’s feeling of loss as he stares up at the sky and sees one desolate star, apart from all the others. Constellations, in themselves, are connections to other stars. S’s loss of an ability to recognize the constellations highlights his loss of all connections to himself and to others, thus he must define himself and create his own culture to follow. When dumped into the sea, S must “hug himself, shivering, between each paroxysm of heaves” (69). The narrator’s use of “paroxysm” communicates that this fit is more than just a physical reaction, but rather an emotional fit. Isolated and hugging himself, S has no one else to keep him warm. Just as he lost connections with the stars, his loneliness will leave him shivering, without anyone to help him. Lacking a past, S is “beholden to no one, responsible for no one, depended upon by no one” (183). Just as S is not responsible for anyone, he also has nobody to look out for him, reiterating his loss of and need for companionship.

Having had his connections with others taken away, S finds himself in ill-advised relationships. After escaping the boat he had been traveling on and coming onto the island where the demonstration takes place, S immediately attempted to form a friendship and trust some of the demonstrators. Afterwards, he instantly wondered if “these people, who are also seeking the lost, fail to share the affinity S. felt for them” (78). One of the men has “receding hair, a deeply-lined forehead, a neatly trimmed beard of reddish brown, and a stern look” while the other “has a full head of unruly dark waves, deeply pockmarked cheeks, and patchy facial hair” (78). The details here do not make either of these men particularly appealing, but S still becomes naturally attracted to their presence. This speaks to his need for some sort of friendship and relation with other people in his life. His connection with them of seeking the lost seems interesting, as the reader does not know exactly what seeking the lost would be. At this point all S knows is that these people are upset and fighting against the police, therefore the ruling society. While S may be seeking his past, they certainly are not. Perhaps he has naturally imagined a connection, because of his need for other people.

Ultimately, S wants to conform to his world, furthering the argument that identity is necessary to human sanity. “S finds himself irritated by how effortlessly water finds the place it belongs” (190). A characteristic of water is that it will naturally take the shape of its container. S wants to feel as if he can fit into any environment. The thing that water has that S does not is that when water fits into a vessel it does not lose its identity. Water remains water, regardless of its shape. Without an identity, S attempts to mold himself to his surroundings, slowly discovering himself. However, if he were like water, he would just be him, and while his surroundings would mold him, he would still be himself. With water, its existence defines its very essence. S desires this easily defined essence, but it continues to allude him.

*Ship of Theseus* begins a dichotomy between our perception of identity and its existence, by contradicting S’s need for self with philosophical arguments. Author of *Adventure, Time, and Philosophy,* Nicolaus Michaud, provides information about why an identity will never exist in the real world. Michaud proposes a few different traits that could make up our identity: memories, personality, and human features. Many people believe that the past shapes people into who they are today, thus forming our identity. However, Michaud argues that our personality and physical features change often throughout our lives, and that transporting our memories to another person would not make that person us. Thus, none of these traits give us an identity. S transitions to this view as the novel progresses and recognizes that “his other selves are gone,” or essentially dead (373). S rejects the idea that his identity transcends time. Rather, each person is an empty vessel. They do not have anything that gives them their essence; they simply have an identity, just as water will remain water, regardless of the shape it takes.

This idea is taken further through the novel’s use of the Ship of Theseus paradox, contradicting the idea of a necessity for identity by eliminating its validity in the world. *The Ship of Theseus*, cleverly chosen as Straka’s title, paradox presents us with a ship which is slowly repaired, plank by plank. If you were to only change one plank in this instance, you would agree that while a plank changed, the ship remains the same ship. Thus, if you later decide to change another plank, you would look at this as a new scenario, and the ship would stay the same ship as before. You can repeat this process, using the same justification, until all of the planks are different. However, using logic, this brand new ship is the same ship as before (Yanofsky). The narrator proposes through the reference to the ship that as one changes you are still yourself, but nothing makes you who you are. Simply stated, “the ship is the ship he is on. The ship is the ship it is” (305). The ship does not have a feature which makes it a ship. Just as Michaud pointed out, the ship’s essence is simply the ship itself. As one progresses in life “time and circumstances change [them]” (248). As seen in the paradox one can become different people all the time because of the progression of time, or as in Straka’s novel each piece of our life are “images [which] are merely individual frames from a film,” and with each frame we become a different person (40). Similarly proposed by author of *Philosophy of Personal Identity and Multiple Personality*, Logi Gunnerson, “each of us is a kind of entity, of which more than one could exist in the same body” (Gunnerson). While Gunnerson takes a slightly different view, he still highlights the question of identity and points out how one constantly transforms themselves. In each circumstance one will be a different person from before. Just as water will be shaped in a different way by its container, people will be shaped by their environment, changing their essence which changes their identity.

This idea of existing only for an instance, echoed through *Ship of Theseus’* use of the arrow paradox, helps to disprove the existence of identity altogether. As proposed by the *Thoughts on S* blog, the *Archer’s Tales,* continually reference throughout the novel, could be referring to the arrow paradox (Thoughts on S). In the arrow paradox it is proposed to imagine a flying arrow and if you view the arrow at an instant, it is motionless. Thus, if you view it at the next instant, it will be motionless in this second moment as well (Huggett). Therefore, regardless of when you look at the arrow, it will still be motionless. This paradox attempts to prove that motion is simply a fabrication of the mind and abolishes motion completely by saying that “what is in motion moves neither in the place it is nor in one in which it is not” (Huggett). The arrow paradox can also be used to challenge identity since with this paradox you are just a human at an instance, and you do not make your way through the world, you just simply appear in a different location every moment. Similarly to how with the Ship of Theseus paradox “our past selves are gone” (373). Believers in free will think that they move themselves through the world. However, this paradox eliminates our control from the world. If one cannot create motion, they do not pick where they go next, rather they just transition. As the narrator of *Ship of Theseus* stated, “men get lost, men vanish, men are erased and reborn” (3). In a sense this can be seen as how humans move through life. They exist as if humans existed as individual frames from a film constantly dying in the instance and coming back in the next instance, void of an essence. This can also be similarly compared to the Ship of Theseus paradox because people constantly vanish or are erased, yet continue to be reborn.

While proposing both of these paradoxes, which eliminate human choices and what seems to give humans their essence, the narrator ultimately leads the reader to an idea of determinism in the world. The narrator describes our world to be a world “in which options and choices and even desires are ground ever smaller until finally their existence can no longer be confirmed by observation or weight or displacement but only by faith” (319). This raises the idea of not having actual choices in the world, as they do not exist in the physical world. A world which only has physical objects makes it so that “desire is a ghost” (319). The idea of not having desire has two different consequences. First is the idea that what makes up our mind, desire and a soul, are simply empty. Secondly that what you want is irrelevant, because you do not have choices. However, Straka’s main message in this quote can be seen in the end of his quote: that one can find sanity through faith in free will, even though it may not exist. In this world “control is not absolute. This is the story. S’s story” (455). If you look at the ideas in the paradoxes, you do not prove identity or free will, but you must keep faith.

In addition to the argument that faith in free will keeps one sane, the narrator begins to contradict determinism as a guiding moral belief, arguing for a more valid view on humanity and identity. When S finally encounters Sola in the winter city he needs to ask her if she is real, to which she replies “I can’t prove that I am… but you can’t prove that I am not” (390). Sola’s idea indicates how one does not know a lot about their world, yet must simply continue to live. You must just “b’lieve what y’want to b’lieve” since nothing will be fully concrete (212). Straka proposed the Ship of Theseus and the Arrow paradoxes, which argue that identity does not exist, because they are legitimate ideas in the world, but he does not see them as any sort of guideline as to how to act in the world. Straka then proposes an idea that even with determinism “S is human… he is so insignificant as to being guided along gracefully, lovingly, by the hand of Nature—and it frees him…from all worry and fear and fury and grief” (221). Even if you accept determinism and let nature guide us, Straka wants us to let this idea free us and not worry about where you may be taken. As Thomas Metzinger, a professor of philosophy at *Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz,* questioned, “can you really believe in determinism without going insane” (Metzinger)? Straka gives humanity two slightly different approaches to life: let the world gracefully carry you along or somewhat ignorantly hold faith that free will exists, regardless of what philosophy dictates. S reaches a sort of contentment as he recognizes that since “he can see the stars. He no longer has a need for the constellations” (395). Earlier S needed to have the connections that the stars represented, representing his need for an identity. However, now he has let go of this necessity. A very beautiful thing, stars can be enjoyed for their own for their own qualities, rather than having an instrumental value. S has reached a point now where he can enjoy the stars on their own, as he can enjoy each individual moment in the world.

While this free flowing look on life remains important, the novel takes a further step and turns S into a conscious being with identity and decision making, contradicting his proposed determinism from earlier in the novel. When deciding to poison Edvar VI, S contemplates the worthiness of all his actions killing the agents and his true desire. He wonders if it can “possibly matter what man wants” concluding that “it does… it does now, and perhaps it always has” (437). While earlier it was noted that “desire is a ghost” S decides that what he wants, and what people want matters (319). He realizes that if one looks at the world thinking that what they want does not matter or that they have no control of themselves, their lives become completely pointless. The interlude gave the reader a bit of insight into the destructive nature of a society without free will or identity as S continuously killed different agents. All sense of humanity became lost in this section and S simply made his way through his missions. The narrator describes S in the interlude as “a dazed but rapt Hephaestus [who] sits and sweats in the greasy orange glow, watching his hands as if they were not his own” (310). Hephaestus, the Greek god of “fire, metal working, stone masonry, forges and the art of sculpture,” could have been used to symbolize S’s loss of flare (Hephaestus• Facts and Information on Greek God Hephaestus). S simply worked things into the way they existed. Unable to recognize his own hands right in front of his face, S lost his identity completely. However, S later progresses, completely recognizing identity and consciousness in the world by stating that “a shooter is not just a man with a gun…but a man who chooses to pull its trigger” (250). If the shooter were just a man with a gun this would make him synonymous to the empty ghost. However, the recognition that the man becomes the shooter by deciding to pull the trigger gives him consciousness. It steps away from the idea of determinism, which would assume the man with the gun could only pull the trigger. Throughout the novel the narrator presents us with multiple different ideas of how one exists in the world. First he proposed that you need identity, while then contradicting identity and choice in the world to completely deconstruct humanities current perception of self. However, he now reconstructs identity with a new emphasis, while showing identity and choice are real. The narrator does all of this to show us that “what matters is what you do” in this world not how you perceive it or approach our existence (334). In other words, humans define their own personality, and that their existence will define their essence.

*Ship of Theseus* concludes its argument with an assertion that regardless of how people live or why they live, the most important thing in their lives is love. When escaping from their attackers, Pfeiffer tells S that in life “you love, then you lose, then you die” (183). These three things appear to determine our life cycle through the theme of the novel. Showing a care for love here shows us that what happens while you live is important. *Ship of Theseus* shows the reader that one does not live in a world where all of humanities actions are pointless from their predetermined nature. Instead it presents a world following what the old lady told S on the mountain side, that love is always “in the air. It gets into the lungs, and from the lungs into the blood” (289). Love seems here to make up our entire essence. Love makes up our physical being while naturally our emotional self as well. Science supports this theory here as evidence has shown that “isolation, loneliness, conflict, and distress” within the context of love is related to increases in pulmonary hypertension, literally putting a strain on your heart (Kenny). While fleeing with the other runaways, Ostero “couldn’t stand to be without his wife and kids” and therefore killed himself, because the meaning of his life ended. The beautiful thing about love is that it allows “two individuals [to] swallow their uncertainties” (423) and take each other “toward futures of limitless promise” (107). In Straka’s novel love lets one forget questions of why they exist, or how they exist and just enjoy the present and the future together. S lives the life that every person should, one obsessed with love. He found his one true love immediately in the novel, and let it consume his life until he ended up with her. As the novel concluded, Sola and S saw another couple slowly rowing away and they “let their imaginations fill in their features” (456). This quote effectively sums up the novel’s whole message: you can fill in how our world works however you please, but that love, or the couple on the rowboat rowing through life together, will be the most important thing in this.

Straka’s novel showed the reader that while identity seems naturally important to them, you can not guarantee it in this life, but you can still live with a mindset that you have agency. However, regardless of how you decide to live, you should live with love wrapping you up, because when you die, your love is what was important. However, the novel does an effective job demonstrating loves importance to the reader, but can never prove it. An abstract concept, love has very real effects on humanity. *Ship of Theseus* makes the argument that you should chase love through the entire world, regardless of what that means giving up.

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