

Strange Encounters: The Liberating Capacity of Death in Stranger Than Fiction

Vaibhav Dwivedi

Assistant Professor

Department of English

St. Stephens College, Delhi University, India

Email: 9dvaibhav@gmail.com

Abstract

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The essence of the human experience is intricately entwined with profound ruminations over one's mortality. After all, the finality of death is the central unwavering truth of our lives. But herein lies a curious anomaly – though the shadow of death surrounds us at all times, we often take refuge behind a comforting veil of illusion that we are free from it. We continue living our lives in denial (tinged with a sense of dread) that death might perhaps leave us alone. But what transpires when this illusory veil is rent apart? What happens when an individual is forced to confront this final adversary?

In this paper, I seek to analyze the film Stranger Than Fiction (2006) and its fascinating depiction of Death as a cataclysmic event that initiates a tremendous metamorphosis. Through an in-depth analysis of the film this paper investigates how the fatal announcement of his death forces Harold to recognize the truth of his existence. The paper further explores the multifaceted dimensions of death, traversing far beyond the idea of a biological demise. Beyond the specific themes discussed above, the paper will also study how the cinematic medium employs the element of voiceover/narration to facilitate the encounter between Harold and Death in a novel fashion. I will draw upon narrative theories of Roland Barthes and Paul Ricoeur to argue how the site of this unique encounter lies in the psychological realm, and brings incredible alterations in Harold Crick's inner life, which though not visible externally can be brought to the forefront in the filmic medium through narratorial intervention. Ultimately this paper will attempt to locate the heroism of Harold Crick in a mundane world that refuses to understand his predicament.

Keywords

Death, Encounter, Narration, Self, Inner Life, Heroism.

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Vaibhav Dwivedi

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It is an undeniable fact that the very essence of human experience is entwined with profound ruminations over one's mortality. After all, the finality of death is the central unwavering truth of our lives. It does not matter where we stand in life or what our beliefs are, the presence of death always permeates the fabric of human existence. It is a haunting specter, a dreadful shadow that spills onto our dreams, fantasies and fears and forces us to confront our own terrible reality. None who have ever walked on this world are spared from its nightmarish touch.

But herein lies a curious anomaly – though the shadow of death surrounds us at all times, we often take refuge behind the comforting veil of ignorance that we are free from it. We continue living our lives in denial (tinged with a hue of dread) that perhaps we might be free from death. But what transpires when this illusory veil is forcefully rent apart? What happens when an individual is forced to confront this final adversary?

This is precisely the predicament of Harold Crick in the film *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006). In this paper, I seek to analyze the fascinating depiction of death as a cataclysmic event that initiates a tremendous metamorphosis in an individual. The film is an amalgamation of the fantastic and the ordinary world, where the protagonist Harold Crick is somehow able to hear the disembodied narration of his own life. The narrator, who we later find out is a struggling writer, makes a prophetic announcement claiming that Harold is destined to die. An announcement that threatens to rip his world apart. The film brings together fascinating debates of death and life, fate and free will to the forefront, and presents an authentic human experience of a man struggling to inhabit a world that refuses to understand his predicament.

In the scope of this paper, I will argue how the fatal announcement acts as an active catalyst that propels the protagonist towards a spiral of destruction and hopelessness, and eventually allows him to break free from his habitual world and embrace freedom. I will further explore the multifaceted dimensions of death, traversing far beyond the idea of demise as merely a biological phenomenon.

Beyond the specific themes discussed above, the paper will also study how the cinematic medium employs the element of voiceover narration to facilitate the encounter between Harold and death in a novel fashion and bring under the spotlight the unique site of this struggle which is psychological. This film successfully brings to the forefront the infinitesimal alterations that occur in the confines of the human mind, which itself can lead to mammoth alterations. Ultimately this paper seeks to locate the heroism of Harold Crick in today's modern world.

Stranger than Fiction is a film about a man named Harold Crick who has lost himself in the routine bureaucracy of the world. From the opening sequence of the film the viewer is pointedly made aware of the protagonist's dull and monotonous lifestyle. As Harold sleeps on his bed covered in pale bland sheets, an unidentifiable female voice starts narrating his life. The voice announces, "Harold Crick was a man of infinite numbers, endless calculations and remarkably few words". His favorite word was 'integer', and 'mathematics' was the belief system he ascribed to.

As the narrator continues describing his daily trivial acts, Harold appears as a rather strange and unexciting choice for a protagonist. From the act of brushing his teeth, "Every weekday, for nine years, Harold would brush each of his 32 teeth 76 times. 38 times back and forth. 38 times up and down", to tying his tie, "Every weekday, for nine' years, Harold would tie his tie in a single Windsor knot instead of the double, thereby saving him up to 43 seconds every morning" and even his fixed travel routine, "Every weekday, for nine years, Harold would run at a rate of nearly 57 steps per block for 6 blocks nearly missing the 8:17 Faraday Bus", all highlight his tedious and methodical outlook towards life. The last nine years of his existence have pretty much blurred together and are indistinguishable from each other. Each of the shots described above is accompanied by an animated graph, further emphasizing the indifferent and calculative lifestyle of the protagonist. As if his entire life can be easily broken down into indifferent numbers and plotted on the cartesian plane. We see a caricature of a human being, someone who is creatively barren and consumed entirely with the humdrum of stale routine. In short, Harold Crick is the perfect poster child of a bureaucratic, productivity-driven world.

This is of course, until the narrator informs us that soon everything in Harold's life is going to change. Like clockwork Harold begins the day on the same trite schedule. The narration too begins describing his monotonous routine. But something extraordinary happens. Harold can somehow hear this invisible narrator describing his life! Sheer paranoia engulfs him, as his rational mind struggles to make sense of this impossible development. But being a pitiful slave to habit, he forces himself to carry on with his day, trying unsuccessfully to find the source of this narration. However, what's alarming to both Harold and the audience is the striking accuracy of this narration which is entirely truthful and precise.

At this point the film introduces another character, an author named Kay who is struggling to complete her new novel, 'Death and Taxes'. We are informed that she has been stuck with this work for the last ten years. In a conversation with her assistant, she announces her dilemma – she does not know how to kill the main

character, Harold Crick! Through a fascinating turn of events, the film brings two different universes together, where the life of Harold Crick is being written by the author Kay, who is the mysterious narrator we have been listening to all along. Both these characters are unknown to each other, and each believes that the other is but a figment of their imagination. As the film progresses Kay makes the prophetic announcement, claiming that Harold is destined to die. Harold of course can hear this statement, and the shock of this proclamation shatters him. A haunting realization dawns on him – how Kay’s novel ends, would also determine how his life concludes. He must change the story, to change the outcome of his life! And against all odds, Harold embarks on a tremendous quest to outmaneuver death.

To consider Harold Crick as heroic, is perhaps to push the boundaries of our imagination. From the drab house he inhabits to his IRS workplace everything highlights the importance of utility in his life. We observe a man in his most banal manifestation, occupying an unimportant position as a tax agent in a cyclical and repetitive world. Even his name ‘Crick’ reflects a sense of uncomfortable existence. One eventually gets used to a crick – an annoying nagging stiffness in the neck that robs you of comfort. His self is defined by what he does, his job as an auditor. Initially in the film Harold’s actions have no meaning other than simply being movements. His job forces him to perform the same mundane tasks of client interrogation, filing dreary paperwork day after day. Though these movements create an illusion of progress, but in reality he has been in complete paralysis for the last nine years. For Harold to be heroic, this stasis must be broken. It is the narrator’s proclamation of his death that shatters this state of inertia and shocks him out of his routine existence. The narratorial intervention therefore, becomes a catalyst that uproots Harold from his everyday life and puts him in uncharted terrains. The narration in this film is not merely a passive runoff-the-mill instrument to inform the viewer about certain events, rather it actively participates in bringing about this encounter and propelling the story further. How?

The announcement forces Harold to recognize the reality of his existence. Unlike before, now a certain future awaits him – death. Evasion is not an option anymore. In a fascinating turn of events, Harold has crossed an invisible frontier. Everyone is fated to die – yes, but for the general populace death acts as a limitation to the future. For Harold on the other hand, death *is* the future. The idea of death being the future wreaks havoc on one’s soul. It is unnatural and in opposition to the idea of life itself. Devaleena Kundu in her essay, ‘The Paradox of Mortality: Death and Perpetual Denial’ explains the factual vacuum that exists in the post-death territory. She writes,

“Imagining an annihilated self would only affirm that the individual is still present as an observing and thinking being. Thus, human thought processes act as psychological barriers to experiencing death truly. As terminal experience, death remains a phenomenon that cannot be shared.” (12)

Encounter with death therefore becomes a threshold event that jolts him out of his ordinary life and forces him to gauge his own fragile existence. Harold is no more in resonance with the world he was once a part of, an invisible layer separates him from others. His everyday life crumbles around him, as he helplessly tries to fix his position in this labyrinth which is propelling him at breakneck speed towards a catastrophic end.

It is this existence of novel isolation that interests me. The brutal knowledge of one’s death, has ripped apart the comforting illusion of the habitual world. The self now recognizes the destruction it is headed toward, but in this realization lies the possibility of gaining freedom. Harold will die, and he will perish but this knowledge will allow him to be free from the cyclical aimless inactivity of his life.

However it must be noted that at this particular phase, Harold cannot fully fathom the potential freedom which awaits him. He does everything humanely possible to reject this future. From sulking in denial to actively searching for the mysterious author, Harold continues his frenzied hunt for an alternative ending. However, his attempts to return to his past life bear no fruits. He is utterly alone in the world, and time is not his ally. However, this retreat from the orthodox all-consuming public sphere allows him the necessary space to grapple and reflect upon his newfound position. Unknowingly he has already taken tentative steps towards liberty.

The common individual does not seek to ask ‘why’ something must be done. The meaning of any task can always be deferred to a later time or action in the modern world. This endless postponement of meaning brings a malaise-induced comfort to the individual. The action is done with no end in mind. The individual acts merely to repeat the act again. The world becomes enmeshed in redundancy, and any possibility of a different outcome is ultimately lost in the repetition. The individual merely exists as an indifferent, indistinguishable cog in the larger machine. One’s position is cemented in such a world. Harold on the other hand can now give meaning to his actions. The certainty of death has put him on a straightforward path, where deference of meaning is impossible. His mortality is laid bare before him. Hegel’s Preface to *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) describes death as a most terrible thing. But he further exclaims that,

“The life of Spirit is not the life that shrinks from death and keeps itself untouched by devastation, but rather the life that endures it and maintains itself in it. It wins its truth only when, in utter dismemberment, it finds itself” (19).

It is only through utter annihilation that Harold can ultimately seek freedom.

The film also challenges the belief that the world and our position in it is stationary. Initially, Harold’s self was not divorced from the world he inhabited. This indistinguishable self had no iota of individuality, because to be an individual in such a world is to go against its very essence, which is repetitive and mundane. However, awareness of death castrates Harold from this all-inclusive unity. He can only possess his self, when he stops being possessed by this world. The world now becomes the ‘other’ and Harold can successfully separate his public and private self. Upon the ruins of the old world, Harold strives to create something new.

Eventually Harold does start accepting his fate. In a scene right at the beginning of the film he walks past a guitar shop and pauses momentarily as if convincing himself to enter. But being his old dispassionate self, he is unable to act on his wishes and moves away from the scene dejectedly. However, as he takes tentative steps towards acceptance of his fate, he does manage to venture into the shop and buy a guitar which reminds him of his old self. This is a momentous development. Though not traditionally heroic, this simple act is no less than a personal rebellion against a world that demands conformity. As he browses for a guitar in the shop the narration continues, “And then Harold saw it: a damaged and terribly mistreated Fender staring back at him. Despite its obvious maladies, the guitar spoke with conviction and swagger. It looked Harold directly in the eye, and very plainly stated, “I rock.”. This newfound freedom is exhilarating for Harold.

Perhaps the most invigorating encounter in Harold’s life is with the baker Ana, a fiery individual who has no qualms about living life on her own terms. Ana is everything that Harold wishes to be. She is free, full of life and acts upon her desires to spread joy and warmth in the world. In a particular scene after an altercation, a distraught Harold looks at Ana’s bakery through a glass pane. He is both literally and emotionally severed from the world she lives in. Where her world symbolises freedom and life and creation, Harold’s is comprised of decay, stagnancy and boredom. And what is stagnancy if not the death of zeal and passion and the emotions that make us human? And Harold indeed has been quite dead these past nine years.

However, as the film progresses, Harold succeeds in becoming a part of Ana’s world. Hesitantly but surely, he manages to take command of his life and act accordingly. The old world, comprised of Harold’s old friends and acquaintances

from his IRS job labels his transformation unrealistic and unstable. His newfound identity does not fit into the suffocating mold he had previously easily adjusted to, and this seems unfathomable to the people. It is easier to label him insane than to reflect on their own positions. But Harold is no more a mere participant of the old order; he has broken free. It is the act of narration that forces Harold to realize that biological death is perhaps not that terrifying anymore because he has already faced and lived through the rot of stagnancy.

In this final section of the essay, we will discuss Harold Crick's rich inner life which becomes the arena for the most powerful conflict in the film. The entire quest, from the narrator's intrusion to his ultimate acceptance, I will argue that it is within the confines of his mind that much of the significant action takes place. Initially, Harold's mind is passively receiving all the information being provided. The narrator's voice, though in his head, is an alien element that his mind cannot fathom. Professor Holbert, another character who assists him during his journey too is a foreign voice. The voices of his old colleagues, his psychiatrist or anyone else offering him advice are nothing but a rabble of external opinions imposed upon his self. It must be noted that all these voices do not originate from Harold's own self, and he merely listens to them. Eventually as the film progresses, Harold accepts his destiny and starts reflecting on it. This reflection is of paramount importance. Though reflection does not constitute physical movement, it does show how a passive mind is slowly turning active. The impressions left on him by other voices throughout the film finally start to seep in. For the first time ever Harold starts listening to his own voice.

Before his fated day of death, Harold reads the manuscript of Kay's novel. Before this scene, he had left no stone unturned to avoid facing his life's story. From confronting the author to change the novel's end to pleading with Professor Holbert to offer some miraculous solution, Harold has exhausted all possibilities. But with all doors closed, he had no other option but to boldly face his fate. In a brilliant three-minute shot, Harold simply sits silently in a bus and continues to read, while the world around him constantly fluctuates. Though he is physically motionless, his mind is in a most tumultuous state. The character himself has become the site of action. Barthes and Duisit's essay 'An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative' (1975) argues that a character can be "the embodiment of a psychological essence" (256), and the actions which such a character undertake can be "to desire, to communicate, to struggle" (258). Harold's desire to live, his failed attempts at communicating his dilemma and the struggle to overcome these hardships emphasize his immense psychological depth. The very next scene shows Harold walking up to

the author of his book, Kay, and requesting her to publish the book as it is. His metamorphosis is complete. Interestingly, this act of bravery occurred precisely because Harold was able to reflect and think in his mind. The physical action is preceded by psychological transformation. Harold finally reconnects with his inner world, and can stay in resonance with his authentic self.

On the destined day, Harold proceeds to continue with his life in the exact same manner despite knowing what awaits him. He once again dresses up like he used to and takes the fixed route to the office. The same actions become profoundly meaningful here, given the weight of knowledge under which they are carried out. Harold knowingly faces his own death. Achilles the great Greek warrior knew he was fated to die if he fought in the Trojan War. But he did fight. Harold too ventures out into the battlefield, despite knowing the consequences of his actions. Though no Trojan war awaits him in the modern world, Harold is not less heroic.

It is perhaps in the final sequence of the film, that we fully fathom the gravity of his actions. Though Harold expected to die that day, somehow, he survived. Kay, the author of Harold's life book provides us with a fitting conclusion. She says, "It's a book about a man who doesn't know he's about to die ... then dies. But if the man does know he's going to die, and dies anyway ... dies willingly, knowing he could stop it ... you tell me. Isn't that the type of man you want to keep alive?" Harold as a character successfully alters the plot itself! By changing himself, he influences fate itself.

It is indeed tempting to argue that Harold Crick has defeated death itself. However, this argument limits our understanding of human's complex relationship with mortality. What Harold's story does tell us is that death is *not* the final villainous adversary that must be beaten. It is a necessary part of life. An honest bitter truth that must be embraced by everyone. And what could be more heroic in this world than to willingly accept the burden of our own fate – to be alive and understand that one day we will cease to be? Through his metamorphosis we understand that instead of incessantly repressing death, it is necessary to give it a tangible place in our everyday reality.

Ultimately this film heightens our proximity to our own mortality through Harold's incredulous journey. As Harold prepares to die, we too mentally accept that death is an unavoidable entity. And as we accompany him in his physical and emotional wanderings, his ecstatic highs and torturous lows, our minds too attempt to make sense of his predicament. And even though the circumstances of Harold's death might seem fantastical and devoid of logic, a part of us remembers that death in real life can be even more senseless and arbitrary. By brilliantly binding the

character and the audience with the threads of the same inevitable fate, the film blurs the boundary between the fictional and real world. It is not a surprise then, that in the final scene of the film Harold can no longer hear the narrator. It is because he has finally taken command of his own life. His inner world is alive and breathing again. Harold Crick is in control of his own fiction.

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