Once Upon a Time:
The Author Is Dead! Long Live the All Mighty Quill!

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Abstract
Perchance the world's greatest advertisement of fairy-tales, Once Upon a Time, the fantasy drama television series featured on Netflix, goes past its entertaining marketing strategies and brings to the fore one of the longest enduring and most polemical poststructuralist theories, i.e. the death of the author and the literary emancipation of characters. The aim of the current paper is to prove, above anything else, that the primary object of Once Upon a Time, the TV series can be construed as one of telling the story of the characters' literary emancipation and the inherent death of the author.

Keywords: *death of the author, literary emancipation, scriptor*

The Beginnings

> *'We know a world is an organism, not a machine. We also know that a genuinely created world must be independent of its creator; a planned world (a world that fully reveals its planning) is a dead world. […] My characters still exist, and in a reality no less, or no more, real that the one I have just broken. Fiction is woven into all, as a Greek observed some two and a half thousand years ago. I find this new reality (or unreality) more valid; and I would have you share my own sense that I do not fully control these creatures of my mind, any more than you control – however hard you try, […] your children, colleagues, friends or even yourself.'* (John Fowles, *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, 1969: 41-42)

Fairy-tale characters, writers whose names are invoked in a poststructuralist present that dismisses *the author*, inking *words* that have the all *mighty power* to encage or set characters free are carefully wrought

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and wonderfully coexist in(to) the wor(l)ds of *Once Upon a Time* (2011-2018), whose producers are Edward Kitsis and Adam Horowitz.

Perchance the world's greatest advertisement of fairy-tales, *Once Upon a Time*, the American fantasy drama television series featured on Netflix, goes past its entertaining marketing strategies and brings to the fore one of the longest enduring and most polemical poststructuralist theories, i.e. *the death of the author* and the *literary emancipation* of characters.

From the first season to the seventh (conceivably, one might perceive *Once Upon a Time* and its seven seasons as faintly alluding to and resembling the Biblical story of God and the World's creation), the past of our childhood stories is continuously rewritten on the white screen of the TV set which becomes yet another stage where characters have the power (and the *qu/will*) to tell their own stories about themselves, outside of their own mind (transposed by means of a giant *collective unconscious* – the tape of the film).

As young children, we used to look for and read fairy tales mainly because they included beautifully coloured illustrations interwoven with words of uncertainty and wonder that stirred our curiosity and gave birth to *sensationalist* adventures. *Sleeping Beauties* or *Damsels in Distress*, *Princes Charming* or *Villains*, fierce *Pirates* or powerful *Wizards,* we all mimicked at least one of these characters, if not all of them as young children. And yet, our stepping into adolescence, this path we all take from childhood to maturity, brought along some sort of *amnesia* where we were bound to forget all these magic adventures until the moment when, as grownups reading the same bedtime stories to our children, we rediscovered this space of magic and mystery, and we indulged ourselves, yet again, in this land where dreams come true and the world's wisdom is collected in one single pulsating heart, the magic wor(l)d. With these fairy-tales the impossible has become possible again and the world has suddenly turned into a place of multiple coexisting heroes, each writing their own story of adventurous deeds.

Past and present, old and new, most of the characters in the series are taken out from the renowned fairy-tales of The Brothers Grimm and Hans Christian Andersen, popular European literature, Arthurian legends, and Greek mythology, as well as from Disney world. The producers of the TV series thus create a postmodernist, intertextual mix verging on the metafictional, where characters of various fairy-tales meet, interact and redesign/rewrite their fictional paths, thus transcending the boundaries

and altering the course of their original stories. If Pirandello was boldly experimental(ist) and absurd(ist) in the 1920s, sending his ready-made characters in search of an author, for the latter to write their story *exactly as it had been meant to be*, the twenty-first-century literary games translated into visual representations in *Once Upon a Time* no longer bother (*too much*) with this 'requisite'. Postmodernism has done away with it, and post-postmodernism is now reaping its fruit. Barthes's '*murder*' of the author and Foucault's turning of the latter into a mere textual function concur with fragmentation, parody and intertext in this metafictional enabling of characters to take over the story. The antiquated formulae "the king died and then the queen died" – as story – and "the king died and then the queen died *of grief*" – as plot (Forster 1927/ 2012: 61) no longer suffice. *What* 'happens' and *why* that is move to the background when *how* is decidedly coming into play. This last question is answered, in a poststructuralist manner, via discourse, whose 'agents' become the emancipated characters and the interwoven spaces that they carelessly transcend. Kings and queens may die in *Once upon a Time*, either of grief or of other (mostly magical) causes, but they are no longer peripheral because they assume the (re)writing process. *I write therefore I am*, the characters of *Once Upon a Time* might say. And since *they are*, they do not need an author to take them down the paths of fiction, though they may still cling to that imposing *morphology of the folktale* outlined by the Formalists also in the 1920s.

Just like a white page waiting for its stories to be written down, their *fictionalized space* (allegorically bordered by four *corners* (sic) of the world, i.e. *Wonderland, Neverland, Oz* and *Arendelle*) directs stories into making characters what they are, enabling or preventing protagonists from building themselves out of stories that run in parallel dimensions and sometimes overlap the fictionalized *reality* of the coastal town of Storybrooke, Maine, in the *Land Without Magic*. As such, the film becomes a *storyteller* whose purpose is not that of telling us what to think but rather of giving us food for thought on *dead authors*, providing us with new options for reading the text, empowering *readers (scriptors)* with the freedom to interpret the text on its own merits.

Magic Doors and Wishing Wells, Help Me Get to Storyb(r)ook(e) Again

> *Adoption Agent: 'I've never heard of Storybrooke'.*
> *Regina: 'Oh, it's a hidden gem. […] It's like a fairy tale.'*
> *Adoption Agent: Storybrooke, Maine is a Land without Magic.*

When interviewed by *The Hollywood Reporter,* Adam Horowitz stated that all throughout the series, their one and only drive had been that of doing "a show that had optimism at its heart" as they "felt like there was so much darkness in the world." (J. Bentley) Kitsis, in his turn, affirmed that they "like to see the world half full not half empty" and "among all the trials and tribulations of life you can preserve and find light among the darkness, (…) that ability to think that life will get better." (J. Bentley)

Jennifer Morrison, the star embodying Emma Swan, the daughter of Snow White and Prince Charming in the Enchanted Forest, told *The Calgary Herald* that the whole film is "a show about positivity and connectivity which encourages people to believe in themselves and believe the best versions of themselves and to have hope to have the life that they have" (Volmers 2018*).*

Throughout all the seasons of *Once Upon a time***,** the postmodernist concept of man's *alienation* seems to have taken the shape of a *curse of forgetfulness* meant to eventually delete the *reality* of all the characters that have ever existed in the realm of never-ending stories. The more people forget about Snow White and her Wicked Stepmother, Prince Charming and his brave deeds, Captain Hook and Red Riding Hood, Rapunzel and Ariel, or Beauty and the Beast, i.e. Rumpelstiltskin – these are but few of the characters entangled in the story –, the more these characters' lives start fading away depending on the fragile thread of people's belief in the characters' power to be outstanding. In the world of *Once Upon a time*, which is geographically marked on the map of the world as the city of Storybrooke, in Maine, stories have to be read (by real people) and stories have to be told (by characters themselves) or they die; and when they die, they will not be remembered, nor will they know who they are or what their purpose in life is.

From the beginning to the very end of the film, the story of *Once Upon a Time* seems to be gravitating around the idea that there is no beginning or no ending to a story, and each of the characters caught in it arbitrarily chooses the moment of experience wherefrom to look back on or where to look ahead. As listeners (and viewers) of the stories that get unfolded as we speak, we seem to demand some sort of redemptive act so that the one who falls be given the chance to restore their name, although we simultaneously fear the price of restoration and what that might involve.

And yet, apart from the characters' power to shape their own lives by the *power of imagination*, there is something more prevailing than that, the *all mighty quill*, a fundamental instrument of *thought* which turns narrative imagination into stories: a single strike of the pen, a single word or phrase uttered has the power to look into the future, predict, plan and explain choices made by characters at certain points in their lives. All the characters in *Once Upon a Time* are storytellers and their lives are part of a huge network of stories, which is why there is not a stronger bond between them than storytelling. They all belong, just as in Jonathan Gottschall's *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human*, to "a species" and they "are addicted to story", so much so that "even when the body goes to sleep, the mind stays up all night, telling itself stories" (2012: 9).

> All are creatures of an imaginative realm called Neverland. Neverland is [their] home, and before [they] die, [they] will spend decades there. (...) Story is for these characters 'as water is for a fish – all-encompassing and not quite palpable.' While their 'body is always fixed at a particular point in space time', their 'mind is always free to ramble in lands of make-believe. And it does. Yet Neverland mostly remains an undiscovered and unmapped country (2012: 9).

Threatened by oblivion, alienated in the modern world, all the characters who had been cursed in *Neverland* dream about their own stories, the only narrative thread that connects *Neverland* to the *real* world. As such, the stories they dream about literally make their world and when they need to change the world, they only need to change their dream-story.

Once Upon a Time, the TV series, is nothing but a matrix of fairy-tales in a new attire as it has already adapted itself to and embraced modern life: many traditional fairy-tale characters known to us since childhood have been deconstructed and metamorphosed into modern characters that mirror back the psychological demands of the contemporary audience in the postmodernist cultural environment of alienation, otherness and glob(c)alization that longs for *the enchanted* in life, activating an inexhaustible creativity.

By means of unambiguous visual and textual clichés which are kept in a well-balanced interaction, this multifaceted *narrative* has legitimized the importance of local values and led to their dissemination and serialization worldwide, one that dislocates the brevity of the tale itself which, by the *power* that has been invested in the *quill* no longer remains in

the lost world of magic but is constantly written and rewritten in a *future* which has already become a *stereotyped present*.

Leaving aside all lessons of hope and trust for a better life, the aim of the current paper is to prove that the primary object of *Once Upon a Time*, the TV series can be construed as one of telling the story of the characters' *literary emancipation* and the inherent *death of the author*.

As a rule, the *author's death* is a well reputed and equally controverted catchphrase suggesting the poststructuralist *amputation* of the author and indicating persuasively that the author does not matter; only the *text* does.

In his 1969 lecture, *What Is an Author*, Foucault assigns an entire paragraph to what he refers to as the "the kinship between writing and death" which appears to invert an age-old theme according to which most Greek epics were "destined to perpetuate the hero's immortality" (Major-Poetzl 1983: 116). He grounds his argument in *One Thousand and One Nights,* where the main motivation, theme and pretext of the *story* is to not die. Although centuries apart, it would only seem that *Once Upon a Time* shares the same motivation, theme and pretext with *One Thousand and One Nights*. Strange as it may seem, this theme, initially programmed to keep *death* at bay, has undertaken various metamorphoses so that "writing is now tied to the sacrifice of life itself" (1983: 117) and eventually "the work whose duty it was to bring immortality has now received the right to kill, to be the murderer of its author." (117)

Mighty Quill and Magic Ink, the Author's Writing in a Blink

> *'I've got the Author and I've got the ink. I wanted you to witness the moment he writes me my heart's desire' (Regina to Zelena).*

Along the lines of Foucault's allegation that "all this is known; and for quite some time criticism and philosophy have taken note of this disappearance or this death of the author"(117), in *Once Upon a Time* "the Author's true job is to record the stories, not to create them" (*Once upon a Time, The Apprentice*) alluding somehow not only to the author's implicit role of *typist* (instead of *creator*) but also to the *characters' emancipation,* since the latter now hold complete control over their own lives: "so, no matter how many stories you may have already written, you must choose each time how you will use the pen" (T*he Apprentice* to the *Author*).

Once Upon a Time does not only *dismiss* but also *invokes* the author (seen as a mere tool which engages the *quill*) because, just as with Barthes, *the death of the author* actually institutes a relation in which both the reader and the characters desire the author and impose on him what to write when things get rough and stories do not unfold according to their dreams.

In *Once Upon a Time* the author is dead, at least from a metaphorical point of view, since, as in Fowles's Chapter 13 of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, he does "not fully control these creatures" of his world: in the film series, author and characters repetitively fictionalize their own lives.

We know that "all novelists wish to create worlds as real as but other than the world that is" (Fowles 1969: 41). Correspondingly, "a world is a mechanism not a machine" and "a genuinely created world must be independent of its creator; a planned world (a world that fully reveals its planning) is a dead world. It is only when characters and events begin to disobey that they begin to live." (42) *Once Upon a Time* turns out to be a mechanism which is independent from its creator and where characters are constantly disobeying the *All Mighty Quill* each and every time it starts planning their world. The characters are woven into fiction and they are constantly pulled towards the reality of the creative process while keeping themselves at a distance from the illusion of the product created by the characters' world. They refuse to allow their creator his liberty and so he is morally and aesthetically bound to obey them.

On the one hand, the *All Mighty Quill* assumes the role of a god-like narrator who, since art mimics life and its endless prospects, creates what and how it pleases; on the other hand, as readers of the visual story of the characters, the viewers witness a comparable slice of life to which they need not respond, since what they read (*see*) is just entertaining food for thought (a *show*).

Like Fowles's his(s)tory, *Once Upon a Time* breaks down the irreconcilable difference between reality and its mirrored image, and manages to create a different moral and human connection between art and life for the film genre. *Once Upon a Time* plays literary games whose rules the watchers learn as the characters move on and about: there is a particular inner motivation entailed by the process of creating the fairy tale universe, one which makes authoritative demands upon the *Author*, compelling him to abandon any plans before putting *quill* to paper.

The *narrator* (the TV series) rushes to assure readers (watchers) that *he* is not disproportionately artificial or reserved, since the act of creating a

self-contained world similar to our world is a very natural act for each viewer.

Watching *Once Upon a Time* is similar to a question-and-answer session between the narrator (in this case the *TV series*) "Have I disgracefully broken the illusion?" (Fowles 1969: 42) and the readers of the visual co(n)text, constantly challenged to put the pieces of the puzzle together. And yet, since "[m]y characters still exist, and in a reality no less, or no more real than the one I have just broken" (42), one could just as easily claim that this *new reality* is the watcher's *new illusion*. For the onlookers, fiction is *'woven into all'*; on another level, they are drawn into the reality of the creative process while remaining distanced from the *illusion* of the product created, the *character's world*.

Throughout the entire series, the concept of *death* is symbolically portrayed by means of *replacement*: once fallen in disgrace for having used the quill for personal benefits, Isaac Heller, *The Corrupted Author,* is downgraded, punished and replaced by Henry Mills, *the Current Author* because, even though it can be used to change the past, the *Author's Pen* can never (be allowed to) change the past that it has not created and which characters have designed for themselves (through *literary emancipation*). Made of enchanted wood, the *All Mighty Quill* is a *magical energy*, a living, breathing entity: "pen and ink are enchanted with magic. They are so powerful I can do more than just write people's stories… I can change them." (Isaac Heller to Cruella de Vil)

As such, the *Author's Pen* is an avatar of Roland Barthes' *scriptor*; it turns into a *conceptual space* where all the countless potential meanings of the text are contained: *the magic ink* (replaceable by the blood of a person who sacrificed themselves heroically for someone else) runs through the *quill* and bonds itself to the *Author's will*/writing hand, which can be used to record people's stories or write something into existence. It can be used to rewrite someone's story or change people's memories by creating a past in their minds but, to make this possible, the ink must be infused with the Saviour's darkness (see *'Heart of Gold'*, *'Mother'*, *'Operation Mongoose Part 1'*, *'Operation Mongoose Part 2'*).

In his essay on the D*eath of the Author*, Barthes contends against the practice of reading and criticism as being grounded into an author's personality to filter meaning from the author's work. In this type of criticism against which he debates, the experiences and biases of the author serve as an absolute 'clarification' of the text. Nevertheless, for Barthes, this

method of interpretation may be deceptively uncluttered and appropriate but is, in fact, untidy and inconsistent: '*To give a text an author*' and assign a single, corresponding interpretation to it '*is to impose a limit on that text*. (1988: 167)

The Trinity

> *'To be honest, I'm looking for stories with a bit more pizazz. A great story always needs just a sprinkle of magic' (Isaac Heller).*

From the first to the last season, *Once Upon a Time* constantly challenges the practice of traditional *reading* and *criticism* as being rooted into *the author's* personality, so that the *Text*, the *Author* and the *Reader* become part and parcel of the cast of the film. The *All Mighty Text* is given the part of the *Sorcerer*, never to be seen, only to be feared because of its incommensurable authority that almost pertains to the *enchanted;* the *Author* is powerless and *dead* since it has turned into a mere typing hand and the *Reader, the Apprentice,* is almost as influential as the *Sorcerer.*

For centuries, the *Sorcerer* and his *Apprentice* have chosen an *Author*, whose sole duty is to record stories in a storybook using a magic quill and ink. With a view to finding *the story* of his career, the latest *Author*, who turns out to be a *Corrupted Author*, Isaac Heller, goes back in time as far as the 1920s, in England, where he falls in love with a charming girl, Cruella, and uses the pen's writing capacity to his personal interest: he gives her a necklace and earrings. Infatuated with Cruella, Issac asks her to run away with him; pretending to fear her scheming mother, Cruella is provided with the ability to control animals by Isaac. However, Cruella secretly steals Isaac's pen, which he only discovers after Cruella's mother, Madeline, discloses her daughter's vicious persona to him. After Cruella kills Madeline, Isaac repossesses his pen, managing to dip it into the ink bottle just before the ink splashes all over Cruella's face, turning her blond hair black and white, and changing her appearance. She suddenly corners him but Isaac manages to write on paper that she can never kill again *(*see *'Sympathy for the De Vil', 'Operation Mongoose Part 1').*

Later on, Isaac abuses his role as *Author* by manipulating the *Apprentice* into infusing Maleficent's child with darkness and expelling the baby to another realm. While Isaac is in the midst of writing in a storybook, the *Apprentice* confronts him about his interfering, to which the *Author* casually remarks that it made for a better story. Considering him *corrupt*

and *unworthy* of being an *Author*, the *Apprentice* formally asks Isaac to forfeit the pen, before banishing him into the book *('Best Laid Plans')*.

Reading Once Upon a Time with the *Death of the Author* in mind, it is easy to understand that the *Apprentice's* main goal is that of separating the storybook (the literary work) from its *creator* (Isaac Heller, the *Corrupted Author*) in order to liberate the text from interpretive tyranny, so that each piece of writing contains multiple layers and meanings. Like *Cruella* (her coat and body, i.e. her skin, her hair), *Once Upon a Time* becomes a text, "a tissue (or fabric) of quotations drawn from innumerable centres of culture" (Barthes 1988: 171) rather than from one, individual experience. Like Barthes' scriptor (born out of the confrontation between *author* and *authority*), the *Corrupted Author* is no longer the focus of creative influence since he *occurs* to produce, not to enlighten the work, and "is born simultaneously with the text, is in no way equipped with a being preceding or exceeding the writing, is not the subject with the book as predicate" (170). Read through this lens, *Once Upon a Time* appears not to create its meaning in the past but rather in the present continuous, *here and now*, with each re-reading, because the *origin* of meaning lies exclusively in *language itself* and its impressions on the reader.

Enchanted Forests and Neverlands Keep Us Safe from the Magicless Land

> *'**Heroes and Villains** is close to my heart. It's been a passion project for longer than you would believe. I wrote it because I think folks are sick of heroes getting everything in these classic fairy tales. Hence, the radically different endings for Snow White, Prince Charming and all the rest. Something different for a modern audience. What happens when villains win the day?' (Isaac Heller)*

Intending to get rid of her sister Zelena, Regina takes the *Author's* pen from Mr. Gold, before magically carrying herself and Isaac to her vault. There, he explains the ink must be infused with the Saviour's darkness in order to rewrite a story. Realizing the darkness meant for Emma is already in Emma's friend Lily, Regina steals some of Lily's blood for the pen, so Isaac can write Zelena out of existence. However, when Regina changes her mind and backs out of the plan, Isaac betrays her by using the pen and the ink to send himself to the pawnshop, where Mr. Gold conjures another book, *Heroes and Villains*, for him to write new happy endings *(see 'Mother')*.

Isaac finishes writing the story and concludes the storybook with the words, '*The end*'. As result, a bright flash fills Storybrooke and everyone, aside from Henry, is taken into *Heroes and Villains*, where they have alternate lives *('Operation Mongoose Part 1')*. Henry unexpectedly joins the power of the pen, becoming the next *Author*. Isaac warns him that without ink, Henry isn't writing anything, but, by using Regina's blood as ink, Henry undoes all of Isaac's villainous work and reverts everything back to normal *('Operation Mongoose Part 2')*.

At a first glance, *Once Upon a Time* might seem like just another film adaptation of fairy tales and yet, apart from its being the world's most comprehensive advertisement of fairy tales, it takes us to another place, where heroes are never born heroes but strive to become heroic, and villains are always good people who have been wronged and pushed to embrace this transformation. Good is not innate and neither is evil, and behind every choice there hides the *power of the quill* in a strong relationship with the *Author's* hand. With no imperfections to be brought to light there would have been no stories to tell, and, although it is a vital human discomfort, *imperfection* is one trait of character which is required for the story to exist, empowering us to see through the eyes of others, gradually becoming the *other*.

The quill has never had one single reigning *Author*, and the *Author* needs to be morally fit to deserve its servant once he starts putting the quill to his own selfish use, he becomes unfit, is punished and replaced by another, although there are no instruction manuals on how to use the quill but one's personal *moral compass*. And, just like old times storytellers who sat and told stories by the fire, disguising themselves into their own story, the quill is magically used not only to record everyone's stories, but its own story as well.

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