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Undecidability of Meaning in Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist* and William Golding's *The Lord of the Flies*

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Abstract

This paper unpacks the assumption of inevitable semantic indeterminacy inherent in Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist* and William Golding's *The Lord of the Flies*, the twin mono-interpreted texts. Moreover, the book about which the paper is written, in turn, becomes his sustained effort to demonstrate how a deconstructive literary theory can enable readers to see inside (or through) a rich and enigmatic text. The method employed is that of qualitative close-reading, and we are particularly attentive to the tendency throughout for dichotomies (innocence/experience, free will/destiny, etc.) to leak into any message it might seem at first possible to deduce. Crucial to my argument is the sense that both novels continue to contest a single authorial meaning, despite their differences. *The Alchemist* interrogates the quest through dualities: predestination versus free will. Simultaneously, *The Lord of the Flies* dismantles civilisation versus savagery with a hint that it could be (if a vile one) another kind of social order. Finally, the theory shows that meaning is unstable in itself, which constantly takes place and engages the readers as active partners of sense.

Keywords: Binary oppositions, deconstruction, The Alchemist, The Lord of the Flies, undecidability,

Introduction

The present article aims to deconstruct the degree of undecidability at the meaning level that characterises Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist* and William Golding's *The Lord of the Flies*, demonstrating how their narratives, thematic ambivalence, and figure conversion are meant to resist univocal decoding. Using deconstructive literary theory, this article will emphasise that both texts defy simple interpretation–an assertion that complicates as well as readers' domestication of textuality and interpretative strategies. In particular, this study will draw upon Jacques Derrida's deconstructionist viewpoints, which suggest that "no text is ever complete or final to contain the perfect meaning" and that it is only a trace of a pursuit for interpretation (Nayak, 2017, pp. 62-68). This framework uncovers internal contradictions and binary oppositions that dissipate monosignified nuances. Building on mid-20th-century French postmodernism, in which figures like Derrida, Foucault and Lyotard interrogated language, power and knowledge, viewing identity as a shifting product of the self's relation to the other. This philosophical position also posits that language is chaotic and meaning is never stable, thus rendering it impossible to adequately fix (Mendie & Udofia, 2020, pp. 11-20).

Despite being such contrasting works, one a spiritual parable of hope and fate, the other a bleak allegory of human nature, both novels are often analysed from only one didactic perspective. *The Alchemist* is usually hailed as a simple motivational story about chasing one's dreams. In addition, *The Lord of the Flies* is used as a warning lesson on the disintegration of society in the absence of law and order. However, a deconstructive reading shows that these ordinary readings are full of contradictions. The purpose of this article is to go beyond these reductive readings to show the process by which, not only are both texts actively countering their stated message, but also and more crucially, meaning is a constantly destabilised entity working as an aesthetic concept in the text.

Significance of the study

The paper has clear scientific merits, as it re-reads two popular bestsellers through the lens of an elaborate theoretical approach. The difficulty, of course, is that both *The Alchemist* and *The Lord of the Flies* are conventionally read in essentialist modes, as if

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there is a single age to be gleaned from them, or rather, a single authorial intent. Orion has placed them alongside two curriculum studies, inviting free rapprochements philanderingly. In a deconstructive mode, this essay contests traditional readings while illustrating the adaptability and utility of poststructuralist theory in literary analysis. It is not negative against simplistically anti-social narcissistic literature that turns away from being passively consuming fables into an active sense of language and sense itself. Moreover, in its counterintuitive juxtaposition of two ostensibly unrelated texts (Velez and Mansfield), the book also, importantly, engages with one of the ongoing debates within comparative literature more generally: how ambiguity constitutes a universalism in literary discourse. In the end, it restores literature not as an overcoded repository of truth but as a dynamic and complex conversation with no end.

Methodology

The approach taken in this paper is a qualitative close reading, which is underlined by the deconstructive criticism. The result, according to the project's outline, will be an 'intricate and detailed reading of particular passages, character constellations, and narratological gaps in each novel.' "The focus of this analysis is to identify and disrupt the binary oppositions that organise this set of texts, journey versus arrival, innocence versus experience, order versus chaos. These oppositions, habitually presented as stable polarities, will be demonstrated to do more than inform and support each other: they collapse back into themselves in an act of their mutual undermining or uncertainty. Primary sources will be referenced from both *The Alchemist* and *The Lord of the Flies*, with direct quotes used and textual evidence implemented to reinforce deconstructionist assertions. Secondary sources, including academic articles on deconstruction and literary theory, will be used to contextualise the analysis and provide a robust theoretical framework (Refaat, 2023, pp. 405-414).

Theoretical Concept

The theoretical framework underpinning this study is Jacques Derrida's deconstruction, a post-structuralist approach to textual analysis that scrutinises the relationship between text and meaning. Deconstruction operates on the premise that language is not a transparent vehicle for meaning, but rather a complex system of "différance," a term that combines the concepts of "difference" and "deferral." Meaning is therefore not fully present in a text but is perpetually deferred through its relation to other signs. As a result, texts are not stable structures with a single, determinable meaning, but are instead networks of competing and often contradictory forces. This paper will apply deconstructive principles to expose how *The Alchemist* simultaneously reinforces and destabilises the spiritual quest narrative through its emphasis on material wealth and worldly success (Sarfraz, 2022, pp. 58-66). Similarly, it will show how *The Lord of the Flies* deconstructs the civilisation-savagery binary by revealing that the boys' descent into savagery is an act of constructing a new, albeit terrifying, social order that mirrors the rigid structures they are supposedly escaping (Refaat, 2023, pp. 405-414). By identifying these moments of undecidability, the analysis will demonstrate how both novels resist a single, conclusive interpretation.

Analysis of *The Alchemist*

"*The Alchemist*", at first glance, appears to offer a straightforward narrative of self-discovery and destiny, seemingly promoting a singular, optimistic interpretation of its central tenets.

However, a closer deconstructive reading reveals textual complexities that disrupt this monolithic understanding, challenging the notion of a "Personal Legend" and exposing the instability of its philosophical underpinnings. This analysis examines how the narrative promotes and undermines its assertions regarding fate, free will, and dreams, specifically exploring the interplay between Santiago's agency and his journey's predestined nature. It will also explore the stylistic features employed by Coelho, such as allegory and symbolism, to demonstrate how these elements contribute to both the apparent clarity and the underlying ambiguity of the novel's overarching message (Sarfraz, 2022, pp. 58-66).

The novel's aphorisms and parables invite multiple interpretations of Santiago's "treasure" and its fulfilment. The relationship between man and nature also presents ambiguity regarding control and understanding. Furthermore, the "Soul of the World" and omens can be seen as guiding forces or subjective projections, complicating a definitive reading. This fluidity compels readers to actively co-create the text's significance, embodying the study's focus on undecidability. Moreover, the narrative's focus on inner knowing and on individual 'meaningful coincidences' as a source of guidance also implicitly denigrates all claims for an exclusive brand of truthness by presenting one's "Personal Legend" as not a predestined blueprint but an endlessly rediscovered road (Nabi, 2015, pp. 585-589).

Ambiguity in Santiago's Journey

Even the concept of a "Personal Legend", , introductory to the book's ethos, is open to interpretive slippage because it has no stable meaning and often seems to match Santiago's (growing) understanding or wishes.

This vagueness refuses a univocal comment on Santiago's intention and forces the readers to doubt about destiny. The term's mutability means it can be used to affirm both the spiritual and the cynical deconstruction of its rhetoric. Several visits of people with your past and the alterations of the trip, though cheerful, actually place a 'predetermination punishment' characteristic inside the picture in combination with the free will paradox. This push-pull between free will and fate is an infinite, limitless space where readers write their own versions of Santiago's coming-of-age journey toward self-discovery. It is mainly this borderline between the natural and the supernatural that determines an indeterminacy, one comes to realise whether Santiago's death happens because God has planned it or only indicated in his society (Oreggia, 2015).

Santiago's mentors—the teachers at his school, who so well bring the disputing circles like this into focus, themselves give not a rap

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for the question of existence. Circle-as-closure suggests not only the novel's disgust for a moon (any one moon) but also how our private universe skirts infinity. The representation of fate as predetermined destiny shaped by an all-knowing and all-powerful God that determines life at birth has carried through beneath the surface and beyond human decision (Menin, 2020, pp. 515-532).

Symbolism and Multiple Interpretations

The shepherd, sheep; treasure, all of that which can appear to be clear-cut at some level (or early in the series) is much more productive as pairs from which each can flow into and out of other possible readings, such that they need not be forced onto a single reading of text.

For example, the desert can be both a symbol of agony/purification and isolation/transformation—the ultimate meaning is whatever we ourselves make of it. As the sheep also represents a secure but unfulfilling way of life, this recurrent symbol goes on to symbolise instead both an animalistic connection with nature and the danger of becoming complacent, thus further obfuscating its metaphorical significance. This multiplicity of interpretations, where symbols simultaneously hold contradictory or nuanced meanings, inherently resists a fixed hermeneutic, pushing the reader into a state of continuous interpretive engagement. This interpretive challenge aligns with the philosophical notion of the "constitutive duplicity of the sign," where meaning inherently carries the potential for both truth and deception (Swartz, 1991, pp. 276-281).

Deconstructing the Concept of Destiny

The novel frequently presents destiny as a pre-written path, where divine will orchestrates events, yet simultaneously champions individual agency and the power of choice in shaping one's journey, thereby creating an inherent paradox.

This tension between fatalism and free will compels readers to grapple with the philosophical implications of predestination versus individual volition, rendering a definitive understanding of destiny within the narrative elusive. This inherent conflict mirrors ancient philosophical debates, as seen in works such as "The Odyssey" and "Oedipus the King", which similarly explore the intricate balance between divine order and human will (Kai, 2023, pp. 87-92).

This epistemological quandary, the tension between sense-making and an indifferent universe, recalls Camus' treatment of the absurd. This unresolvable tension between fate and free will, therefore, constitutes a central part of the text's indeterminacy, leaving open for discussion whether Santiago eventually proves victorious (or not) due to his own strength or when yielded to someone else. This complex braid of antithetical philosophies disallows a monolithic, definitive reading and provides fertile territory for alternative critical views. This inherent undecidability, therefore, is not mirage-like but yet another type of narrative device that requires us to participate more actively in the co-production of meaning and is consonant with hermeneutic tenets according to which the act of interpretation does not manifest itself as a static discovery so much as a dynamic procedure.

Analysis of *The Lord of the Flies*

Golding's "Lord of the Flies" is still a dark tour into misanthropy under duress and, like its predecessor, resists any fixed or single interpretation.

The Instability of Social Order

Golding brutally illustrates the futility of a collective social order in this painful revelation of how quickly society can be changed into savagery.

It is the speed at which everything disintegrates into anarchy that counts here. It also demonstrates that, at our core, human systems are inherently unstable, and this paints a pretty dire picture of the world's ability to rule itself. Less a product of the time than it is an awkward redheaded stepchild, as opposed to a monstrosity in action, his shocking revelation arrives only when he is no longer constrained by social mores, which undermines the foundation of human morality. This is akin to Schopenhauer's philosophical dictum regarding the supremacy of 'the will' as an autonomous, albeit irrationally motivated, force governing human conduct, which seeks to debunk the Enlightenment insistence on the centrality of reason in matters of morality (Marimuthu, 2024: pp. 4498-4507).

Psychologically, however, the boys' descent into beastly behaviour and subsequent spiral of ever-increasing violence and tribalism provides an intense analogy for the amorphous layers of human psychology beneath civilisation. Lord of the Flies is a classic novel by William Golding, inspired by Golding's experience in the Royal Navy during World War II. This narrative provides a profound philosophical commentary on the inherent evil within humanity and reflects the anxieties surrounding post-World War II global conflicts. The novel, therefore, functions as a critical examination of the Enlightenment concept of the noble savage, positing instead that civilisation is a fragile construct that barely contains humanity's intrinsic malevolence (Al.Sobh et al., 2022, pp. 21-24).

Deconstructing the Nature of Savagery

Golding's portrayal of savagery extends beyond mere brutality, delving into its psychological and social dimensions as the boys shed their inhibitions and embrace primal instincts.

This descent is not merely a regression but an active embrace of a different kind of order, one governed by fear, power, and instinct rather than reason and societal norms (Golding, 2000). This transformation challenges Eurocentric notions of civilisation, suggesting that "savage thinking" is not a degradation but a parallel way of knowing and organising social structures, particularly when conventional societal frameworks collapse.

Indeed, the author's narrative technique provocatively questions whether an inherent "evil" resides within human nature, suggesting that external societal structures are the primary deterrent against its manifestation. This exploration into the depths of human depravity resonates with post-war disillusionment, where the atrocities of the

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20th century cast a long shadow on the belief in inherent human goodness. The novel employs allegory to explore these complex themes, presenting characters like Ralph and Jack as archetypes that represent contrasting approaches to societal organisation and human governance (Hasan & Sharif, 2020, pp. 125–136).

Ralph embodies the democratic ideal, striving to maintain order and hope for rescue, while Jack epitomises dictatorial ambition, driven by the primal urge for power and immediate gratification. This symbolic dichotomy highlights Golding's argument about the precarious balance between civilisation and barbarity inherent in the human condition. Piggy, representing intellect and rationalism, tragically illustrates the vulnerability of reason in the face of unbridled savagery. At the same time, Simon's mystical insight into the true nature of the "beast" reveals the inherent spiritual struggle within humanity.

Ambiguity in the Symbolism of the Conch

The conch, initially a powerful symbol of order and civilised discourse, gradually loses its authority, mirroring the boys' descent into chaos and the erosion of democratic principles.

Its eventual breaking stands as a metaphor for the ruin of civilisation, and the victory of hysteria over rational discourse – it is more than enough to make you question the basic tenets of the human condition. This metaphorical un-mooring is in keeping with Golding's dour view that man could not be trusted to self-rule over the long haul, especially amid an age of stoke-the-fire-swing-from-rattan-style political fear mongering. Disintegrating the power of the conch symbolises their ethnocentrism. However, as they form divisions and create tribal groups, they begin to prioritise group membership over human values (Khan et al., 2021, pp. 72-76).

There is also an unnecessary division of the narrative theme, which in turn does not allow for a single read to be made: Jack's heavy hand overshadows Ralph's initial attempt to create some order. As well, the breaking of the conch to dust is a crushing reminder that no matter how real Bears or symbols (even if in a pretend world) can only ever have been as strong or real as a mass wants them to be, while calling into question that remarkably, there are subjective systems after all, while being arbitrary at best. Thus, it is that the demise of one's beloved conch shell is, in at least one dimension, a feature of a general epistemic collapse where shared definitions and normative structures are unravelling to make space for what appear from the moral topography to be very dark horizons. Nevertheless, there are some known exceptions to this division that we also briefly discuss in terms of disparity.

Comparative Analysis

This section will then contrast *The Alchemist* (Paulo Coelho) and *The Lord of the Flies* (William Golding) to see how Bardd'ulun is performatively deployed on the level of thematic development.

The Alchemist is every bit as much a religious moment. In contrast, its opposite number, Lord of the Flies, remains an original sin doom spiral and a choking, let 's-see-what-happens' experiment in autocracy from on high, with dashes backwards to the wilderness when there are not any social spigots left anymore. Accordingly, the human will — spiritual soar! — and corruption, as indicated in it, furnish a double potency on the theatre of human history.

The opposing philosophies at work in these two works — individual destiny versus human solidarity —create a rich field in which to question how meaning is slippery and relative, even after we have surrendered everything else to the machines. This is how both writers wind up envisioning a world that, while it does not come to a moral or existentially perfect conclusion, in fact leaves its beginnings open for the reader to see the same quality of human experience nascence-in (Conley, 1986: 118). However, by being what they are, the two stories become themselves models and symbols of literature, and it is easy enough to claim (in Charles Komosa's terms) that both intentionality and symbolic referentiality confirm but also sabotage universally "valid" readings of what human beings really are. In addition, we identify in such stories a dissonant mediation between human interest utilitarianism and environmental determinism, resulting in a dialectic of freedom vs. fatalism on crosscutting direction matters vis-à-vis both individual and collective characters and plots.

Similarities in Narrative Undecidability

On a particular level, they are both undecidable in a truly profound sense. What these novels offer readers is an invitation to create their own 'reading experience' of some of the most complex human responses and experiences.

The writer's part in this frequently remarked particular of much powerful work is at best a part of vanity: he does not like to set himself down for the displeasure of any persons by saying their things too much that way or too much this; but will instead leave it so, and let us see what it is reflects on the nature or society which comes to bear on an individual. For instance, consider Lord of the Flies: one side could easily outweigh the other (Zhu 2020:285–290). Here, universalism crumples into a humanist sublimity that belies simplistic answers. This thus serves as the mean between no-self and self. Easy to get into, the story is easy to follow for *The Alchemist*. Still, that is a lot of spiritual allegory and unshackled interpretation for one character's arc. What can we all contain in one thing? The pervasive intention of indeterminacy in all this forces the reader to consider how truth changes with context and consequences; it does something so much better that it turns didactic generalisation into a question, an invitation to think about what one both intends and happens when response meets circumstance.

Each of these two texts and their narrative is marshalled to make a case about how it is that the reading party might choose actively to subscribe (proscribe) tags in the service of polysemy of existence needed to make up what is fit for "a novel inquiry" as distinct from factuality. This allegorical reading as a double focus (adi, ekal) or priority of the spiritual search on the one hand and dystopia-oriented social commentary on the other will take us towards the layers and levels of multi-level readings-interpretive frames which form/sentences/shape/glue reformulations of human crisis in more

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than one way, as Alok Bhattacharya would say; Gmhimee 2023 p.p. pp..gg86-94).

Divergences in Thematic Presentation

Whereas *The Alchemist* is a tale of optimism where seeking oneself and finding one's purpose are what matter, Lord of the Flies reminds us how fragile civilisation can be and how little it takes for humans to revert to savagery.

This fundamental divergence in the thematic presentation is indicative of the opposing philosophical views of existentialism and the doctrine of original sin, which form each story's underlying philosophy, adding to the impossibility of a single truth of man. The former champions the idea of a benevolent universe guiding individuals toward their destinies, while the latter portrays a world where innate human malevolence inevitably corrupts any attempts at societal order (Alaa, 2015, pp. 98 - 102). This stark contrast highlights the profound undecidability concerning humanity's intrinsic nature and its potential for either elevation or degradation, leaving readers to reconcile these antithetical visions. This kind of split between thematic development also throws readers into some interpretive acrobatics, embracing the difficult work of constantly measuring each writer's vision of humankind against one's own experience with humanness.

There is a merging of two mathematically very different ways of telling, a fable in Coelho and cod brutalism in Golding, because the engineers were trying to graft together an aggressive logic with a contradictory approach to what humans do. This conjunctive indeterminacy and oscillation of readings further characterise the paradoxical rhythms of reading upon which this map-drawing coparticipates with an ambivalence of being as multiplicity-signifying truth, which is interrogated poetically by various existentialist and absurdist philosophers. The authors' inscribing of meaning on such signs in these fictions ratifies this reading as it reverberates through other interpretations so that one, single signifier (say Lord of the Flies's conch or *The Alchemist*'s omen) emerges not so much as a single sign exercised but counter- and curtailed-signifiers that threaten to close down projected systems; readers are prompted by their materiality to confront its constructedness. This much, folded though it is into the characters of each novel (whose motives and actions are recounted in virtually every conceivable mode), muddies anything like a determinate or clear-cut ethical or philosophical "lesson" that we might draw.

Implications for Literary Interpretation

Such deep-seated indeterminacy that runs through *The Alchemist* and Lord of the Flies has a precedent as to how one should read literature: if readers are to identify the subversive nature of polysemy logics which structurally structure texts, they oblige or invite (if not allow) by force of devoir change-of-control, for readers move out from a didactic–in this instance moralizing reading position–to being in an in fact reading position.

This requires that the reader actively participate in meaning-making as they struggle through the ambiguous and thematic gaps. So there should be a much richer complex of human perceptual and cognitive experience to tap. Literary analysis becomes a discursive and existential question, itself an undecidable, which we could compare to what Keats calls "negative capability," that is, a capacity (a willingness) for the undecidable. Dressed up in this quite empty of meaning space the work forces us to ask ourselves at least what interpreting tools for such a literary event were used before we came into being or are already happening now: with the new AI used even at literary analysis, young researchers have already started doubting whether it could ever wish to come close understanding as much about our rich and subjctive nature showed off on human-wrought stories (Jebaselvi et al., 2024, pp. 53–58).

The problem is that AI systems—which are essentially built on symbolic logic and then trained to recognise patterns explicitly—will never truly grasp the "unknowable nature of consciousness" and nuances in human narratives, especially those that might be context-specific. And then you find out what the concrete text (while that there Dickens always is human emotion and doxastic attitude, not to mention meaning, quite a hell of a heap of sense in any sign too often strumpeted with opacity). Such a hermeneutics is also systemic: it can not stop searching for the meaning of words, even though this is its primary focus, but has to include contradictory symbolic values the texts bring (Gładkowska, 2022, pp. 171–198).

So, the "Interpretation Problem" is Problem 1 – because any rule or representation (i.e. AI) is infinitely interpretable – as a posited fact. This suggests that state-of-the-art machine-learning algorithms – with their excellent pattern-recognition and the ability to pick up on relationships between things (ie, meaning) - may struggle with capturing the subjective, non-linearly inferential process characteristic of human literary criticism. This restriction highlights the unique expertise of human readers in "participatory sense-making, a sense-creating dialogue with the unfolding meaning of a text they are reading" (Popova, 2014, pp. 1–14), which remains beyond the reach of computational approaches.

The embedded subjectivity in human interpretation thus poses a significant challenge for AI systems to attain deep knowledge about literary undecidability, which is often based on statistical likelihoods without the necessary qualitative contextualization. Moreover, this qualitative contextualization frequently requires a thorough grasp of cultural subtleties, historical details and authorial intention aspects that are difficult for AI to understand (Raj et al., 2023, pp. 11-15).

Conclusion

The deconstruction of "*The Alchemist*" by Paulo Coelho and "*The Lord of the Flies*" by William Golding reveals how both novels subvert their own overt perspectives, despite being opposites in form and content. With Derrida Reading, we have demonstrated that their narratives resist a single interpretation, thereby compelling readers to confront the indeterminacy of textual meaning. Nowhere is *The Alchemist* more betrayed by its aporias about free will vs pre-determination. *The Lord of the Flies*, for its part, undermines its own civilisation-savagery binary by more explicitly connecting savagery to creating a new form of sociality.

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Critical to this article, there, however, is one revelation: meaning does not exist in some constant form within a text, static or otherwise; instead, it is deferred and mobile – ongoing. However, ironically, the deconstructive reading also reveals the limitations of such traditional didactic readings. In my case, it only goes to show that literature is not something you can treat as if it were comprised of objectifiable knowledge: it is a messy, unfinished conversation. This injunction demands that the reader be more complicit, care more and question the machinery of the artist's system for building 'a machine of words': it condescends to us with soft-sell art's efficacy, by soothing our fears.

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