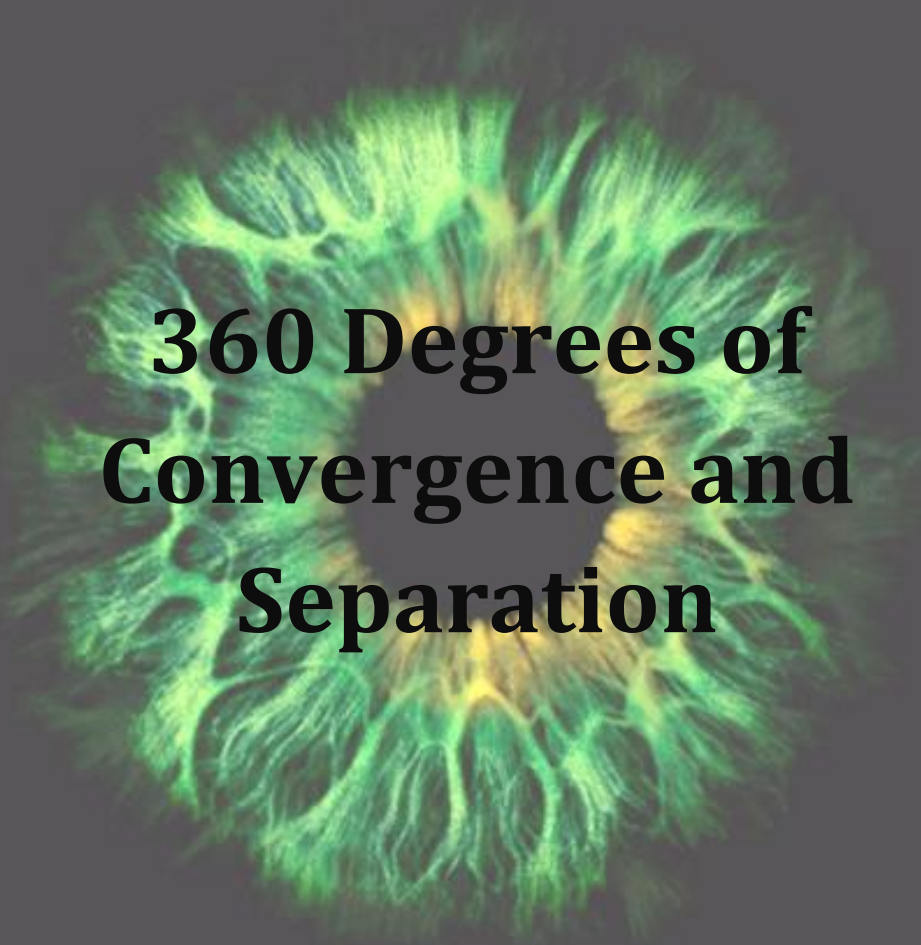


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# 360 Degrees of Convergence and Separation

Hermeneutics and Reader Response Theory in Mark Z.  
Danielewski's *Only Revolutions*

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## INTRODUCTION

**WARNING:** THE OVERLOAD OF CHAOS AND GAPS CAUSES THE READER TO BECOME PARANOID. MEANING THAT EVERY SIGN OF CONSISTENCY OR REOCCURRENCE WILL TRIGGER THE IDEA OF IMPORTANCE AND THEREBY THE NEED TO "GET TO THE BOTTOM OF IT".

This I wrote to myself when I started writing my thesis. The sticky note on which the words were captured was glanced at every once in a while to assure myself that I had not slipped into a state of complete madness – to *stop* me from doing exactly that –, while trying to theoretically explain the obsession that *Only Revolutions* has brought into the world.

*Only Revolutions* is the second novel by Mark Z. Danielewski and it takes us on a journey with its two narrators, Sam and Hailey, guiding us through 200 years of American history without ever really touching it. This poses significant challenges to its readership. For example, the story is split up in two – one half attributed to each narrator – which encourages the reader to read the story from the back and the front *simultaneously*, alternating between the two different narrators every eight pages. It is only with finding common ground between the two narratives that one can reconstruct the events that happen to the two. Being 16 years old and madly in love, Danielewski's two narrators are trying to break free from the world and from American history – which accompanies them in the margins of every page.

"*Only Revolutions* is a piece that I see as written outside the present industry of academia. I don't believe there's a vocabulary yet that can adequately address what's going on. That kind of academic math doesn't exist now." This was uttered by Danielewski himself in an interview with the *Los Angeles Times* in 2006 regarding his, then new, novel *Only Revolutions*. The utterance is quite a provocative one and present critics with the challenge to bring Danielewski's creation back to its origins: literature. Posing that the tools to approach *Only Revolutions* have yet to be invented, Danielewski does not only pull his novel away from literature by indirectly stating that it cannot be anchored in it. Contributing to this, the author suggests that in the reading of this novel no clear structure can be found and therefore that substantial analysis is not possible. But

is it really necessary to generate a new terminology and what would it mean to analyze this novel?

The structure of the novel is quite experimental and innovative and asks both reader and critic to innovate upon the way in which they usually approach novels in order to be able to get to “the bottom of it”. But, most importantly, this novel allows readers to renounce their roles as conventional readers. *Only Revolutions* involves the reader actively in its unfolding and therefore shakes its readers from the passive state in which he or she sits back, relaxes, and has the pages tell a story.

*Only Revolutions* has been called a concrete poem<sup>1</sup>, a love letter<sup>2</sup>, a song<sup>3</sup> – almost everything, except for a novel. It is not *just* a novel, this much can be said at this point, but one should keep in mind that whenever there is an effort made to break a text down it will inevitably uncover literary devices that put everything in motion. While reviews of *Only Revolutions* focus on how to classify the novel and on how to make sense of its narrative, the focus of this thesis will be on uncovering the structure that triggers these needs. More than once we find attempts to fit *Only Revolutions* into an intermedial realm, where it is called a road movie while also being thought of as functioning better in audio<sup>4</sup>. Contributing to this we have Brillenburg Wurth who has characterized *Only Revolutions* as a *hybrid* novel<sup>5</sup> while stressing the visual performance that it presents to its reader. The textual experience is therefore more than once brought to the background in order to analyze the innovating particularities of the novel.

Observing a considerable gap in these analyses, this thesis will distance itself from those approaches and not ask where to fit *Only Revolutions* or what it means, but ask what it *is*. The aim is, therefore, not to present the reader with an interpretation or classification, but with an explanation of the novel’s blueprint. The use of hermeneutics is crucial in this attempt at bringing the text back to that basic structure. The reason for this is that the physical circularity

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<sup>1</sup> Patterson (2006)

<sup>2</sup> Goodwin (2006)

<sup>3</sup> Danielewski as quoted by Goodwin (2006)

<sup>4</sup> O’Hagan (2006)

<sup>5</sup> “[R]ather than ‘merely’ illustrative, materiality and visual design are here fully integrated as a structural dimension of the narrative.” Brillenburg Wurth et. al.

of the work itself does not only conjure up the idea of the hermeneutic circle, but specifically because the use of hermeneutics and the hermeneutic circle will be especially helpful in disclosing the underlying structure.

In trying to uncover the meaning of the bible, theorists – of which Friedrich Schleiermacher is the most prominent in this thesis – have found that there was a connection to be made between the parts of a work and its entirety. This means that to understand a work, one must look at the different segments that it exists of and try to find common ground, an allusion to the rest of the story. This was seen as a way of coming as close to the author as possible, the original author to be approached being, of course, God. This approach enables one to connect the discrepancies that are found in a work together in order to come to the meaning as the author intended it and thus completing the puzzle.

The circularity that is found on the surface of *Only Revolutions*, must allude to a part and whole relationship that hides beneath the surface and sets all the mechanisms that the reader has direct access to, in motion. In other words, in order to find out how the novel works in its entirety, one needs to break it up into parts that mirror those mechanisms in order to find out how the surface is constructed and thereby, what the underlying blueprint is. Following Hans-Georg Gadamer in the belief that it is the interaction between text and reader that generates meaning<sup>6</sup>, the dialogue between *Only Revolutions* and its reader will be of great importance for this thesis.

Paradoxically, the other approach that will play a significant role is reader response theory. Primarily focusing on the terminology and approach of Wolfgang Iser, this theory will prove to be necessary and very productive in this analysis. Because readers, in their interaction with the text, are able to work according to the same system that is found within hermeneutics, these two theories are able to complement each other. Having to work with the blanks in the text, readers have to take all the uncertainties in the text and fill them in along the way. This constant filling in of gaps and reevaluating of information is a quite similar activity as is seen

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<sup>6</sup> Gadamer (1989: 387-389)

with the hermeneutic circle; there is a constant flow of information that is presented in certain segments and it is only through the connecting of these segments that the whole can be constructed.

The combination of hermeneutics and reader response theory, then, allows for an application of the same mechanisms on different levels in this novel. In order to reconstruct the difficulties that arise with the surface structure – which is the page layout, e.g. the level in which the reader enters – reader response theory will be used to look into how, in its outlining on the page, the activity of reevaluating and repositioning information creates a point of entry for the text. After laying bare this surface structure, one has to make a link to the underlying structure – the story itself. By virtue of being able to construct the surface one has then found a point from which to approach, better yet *enter*, the hermeneutic circle that operates on a deeper level.

Hence, the goal with reader response theory is trying to uncover the basic structure of the text and the processes it puts in motion both in the story itself as in the readers' mind, in order to find the devices that have caused the readers of *Only Revolutions* to become trapped inside the circular construction that is this novel. At the same time this theory will be used to get to the hermeneutic base and, thereby, see how hermeneutics and reader response are able to complement each other.

The first chapter will discuss the problem that arises when the reader tries to enter the circle that is *Only Revolutions*. When reading, the reader is advised to alternate between Sam and Hailey every eight pages in order to get the whole story and to get the facts straight. This chapter therefore focuses on what layers the work consists of and how to properly find a way to – and eventually through – them.

The second chapter will take the entry point established in the first one and explain how this works on the level of the reader. Reader response theory will be the main focus in this chapter in an attempt to deconstruct the reader's experience from page one. This way, it is demonstrated what difficulties the reader encounters while trying to penetrate the surface structure, and how, by using the blanks that are found on the surface itself – the typography and



layout – it is possible to enter the novel successfully on a deeper level. For this chapter Wolfgang Iser's concepts of blanks and vacancies, as well as Barthes' concept of disentanglement, will be the main focus. Working with the blanks and vacancies, the constant reevaluation of information will be of great importance to reconstruct the readers' experience, as it will lay bare the mechanisms according to which the reader is forced to operate while trying to get through this novel.

In the third chapter the focus will be on the processes at work at the story level itself. By now we have been able to successfully penetrate the surface of *Only Revolutions* in order to open it up to the story that underlies it. The main framework for this chapter will be hermeneutics and the hermeneutic circle, because it allows for a reconstruction and explanation of the mechanisms at work in this novel. Invoking its own circularity, the unavoidability of circularity<sup>7</sup> is inherent in the work itself and thereby creates a clear field of analysis from which one is able to work. Drawing from this, it will be possible to investigate with what preconceptions the reader is led into the story and if such an approach is productive in this particular case. This brings together the surface and its core and makes us come full circle.

This thesis will try to approach the increasing experimental structure of modern and contemporary literature in a traditional way in order to anchor it inside an understandable discourse. The fact that Danielewski has put his own work above theory, does not mean that none can be applied to it or that a new one has to be invented. This applies not only to him, but to a lot of writers who are trying to break free from literary conventions while producing quite innovative literature. An example could be *The Raw Shark Texts* by Steven Hall, in which one also finds an experiment with both story structure and visual elements.

My belief is that it is not the devices that are missing for understanding these new forms of literature, it is the patience while trying to find common ground with the traditional novel and the obsession that emerges as soon as one dives into these experiments, that hold theorists back

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<sup>7</sup> Schleiermacher (2010)

or keeps pushing them in the same direction. Technology has progressed significantly since the invention of the book press and authors are increasingly making use of the new options available. On the other hand, these developments also grant critics the opportunity to find new ways of working with older theories, which are thereby also opened up and prove to never lose their relevance. The only thing left to do now is open these new ways of producing and dealing with literature up to its readers.

## I. HOW TO ENTER THE CIRCLE: HERMENEUTICS MEETS READER RESPONSE THEORY

The ultimate goal of the psychological [technical] exposition is nothing other than to perceive the consequences of the beginning; that is to say, to consider the work as it is formed by its parts, and to perceive every part in light of the work's overall subject as its motivation; this is also to say that the form is to be shaped by the subject matter.

(Schleiermacher 534)

This quote, taken from Friedrich Schleiermacher, explains that while understanding the part and whole relationship that makes up the hermeneutic circle leads to an interpretation of a text, psychological consequences of the text can be uncovered by connecting its form and content. Focusing on the consequences of the structure that underlies *Only Revolutions*, the reader's experience is foregrounded because that is where the consequences are mostly felt. This also means that what must be uncovered first, is how to establish a clear entry point for the complex surface structure. Drawing from this quote, then, the conclusion must be that in order to enter the hermeneutic circle that is *Only Revolutions*, one must uncover on the first page what the subject matter is that makes up the complex structure that the reader is confronted with upon opening the book. In connecting the particularities in the page layout to the content, the reader should therefore be able to understand what is being read, by determining – at the very start – what the book will be about. In order to do this, one must first enter the hermeneutic circle.

The hermeneutic circle is a theoretical concept which poses that to understand a work, one has to get to the author through the reciprocal transformation that occurs when one tries to interpret it. Seeing hermeneutics as “the art of understanding”<sup>8</sup>, Schleiermacher puts forward the idea that understanding the various segments of which a text is made up, is a practice that can only establish an artistic way of understanding<sup>9</sup>. This means that the reader has to work through the familiarities of language and the difficulties posed by every author's individual use of it, in order to uncover a meaning. The first step is, therefore, to understand that particular language and trigger the activity of interpreting.

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<sup>8</sup> Schleiermacher (2010: 524)

<sup>9</sup> Schleiermacher (2010: 524)

It is only in connecting the separate parts of the work to its entirety that one can uncover its meaning and get as close to the author as possible. Herein, there is a clear connection between intuition and analysis. This consists of the author having created a work – a subject for analysis – after which, through intuition and partly drawing from certain presuppositions, the reader is able to effectively approach this field of analysis in order to uncover meaning. The need for presuppositions is essential because that is what determines whether a theorist is able to actually generate an analysis. It was Heidegger<sup>10</sup> who said that it is only through having an idea of what one will find at the end of the analysis that the analysis is triggered in the first place – which leads to an interpretation. Based on this, the hermeneutic circle does not only exist on the level of the text, but also on the level of the reader in which the reader constantly evaluates different segments of a text according to his or her preconceptions, in order to generate a certain meaning. This can also be traced back to the quote at the top of the page in which the presupposition is able to not only account for the activity of uncovering, but also for the psychological consequences of the work.

Thus, the functionality of the hermeneutic circle for this analysis is that it does not only offer the opportunity to work with the circular structure that was intentionally created by Danielewski, but it also allows to break with it. In being able to apply the hermeneutic circle not only to the surface structure of the text, but also to the underlying story and being able to bring this analysis up to the level of the reader, the hermeneutic circle is able to work on all the different levels of the text.

The hermeneutic circle that is present within the work, therefore consists of several circles that work on different levels and in their connection to each other make up an all-encompassing circle from which meaning can be derived. What we see, then, is that the part and whole relationship in *Only Revolutions* is one that does not only construct the different circles – upon which I will elaborate later – but that this process is mirrored in the transformation that takes place when the separate circles are combined in order to derive meaning from it.

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<sup>10</sup> Spanos (1976: 457)

The importance of reader response theory is that in using the hermeneutic circle, one inevitably comes to the question of how to enter the story and, combined with that – maybe even most importantly –, what part the reader plays in the construction of the story. The layers mentioned, then, also consist of the participation of the reader in recreating the core of the story. In an attempt to recreate this core, the reader is asked to actively participate and to fill in the blanks<sup>11</sup> the text poses as he or she moves along. The relationship between what is revealed and what is concealed triggers a reciprocal transformation that the reader actively participates in through his ambition of finishing the work that is being read. This means that while reading, readers read both Sam and Hailey's stories and later on reconstruct what has happened in order to find a sense of proceeding beneath a surface that seems to consist of streams of consciousness that are interwoven but physically stand apart.


However, this also means that in reconstructing the text the reader does on a surface level what hermeneutics does on the level of the story itself; he spots the blanks in a certain text and by connecting the parts and their separate significances to each other tries to derive the meaning of the whole from it. Using reader response theory thus contributes to the uncovering and understanding of the various layers of which *Only Revolutions* consists, by applying the mechanisms of the hermeneutic circle to the surface level on which the reader operates. This means the reader is working inside the framework of the hermeneutic circle while actively maintaining his or her status as a reader.

The complexity that is found on the surface, does have a clear structure to it that invokes circles and circularity on all levels. What must be taken into consideration is the fact that both Sam and Hailey tell a story in 360 pages, with chapters of 8 pages after which the reader is advised to flip the book over and read the 8 pages of the other character. Furthermore, every page contains exactly 360 words, meaning that the historical columns and both versions combined always come to the same total word count per page. Consequently, this also means that as 360 is divisible by 8 and Sam and Hailey are forever 16, bringing the characters together

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<sup>11</sup> Iser (2010: 1527)

would bring us to a sum total of  $8+8=16$  pages which contain roughly the same content and therefore the alternation between the two different characters is what seems to trap them in their age. Tilting the number 8 also contributes to the loop in which Sam and Hailey are trapped forever, seeing as  $\infty$  (the sign for infinity) beautifully demonstrates what the book is doing.

Danielewski has created a clear connection between all the different aspects of the book. This makes it so that every part of the book alludes to the whole, which can be connected to the functioning of the hermeneutic circle. The mathematical structure that underlies *Only Revolutions*, then, is what in part provides the devices to work with. Furthermore, strict mathematics is also what makes it so that the storylines never physically meet, as two parallels can never touch each other. This is mirrored in the consistent use of “all”(for instance, “although”) by Sam and Hailey throughout the book. Being quite selfish sixteen year olds, this strange spelling alludes both to character and the basic structure of the novel which is represented in the logo . By demonstrating how two parallels never meet within a circle, the logo alludes to both the inability of the characters to meet physically on the page, as well as their entrapment inside of the circle that makes up their stories. This discussion could be continued endlessly as everything can be connected and looking closer at the book will provide even more subjects for analysis, but this brief explanation of structure must suffice for now.

The ambiguous structure of *Only Revolutions* causes the entry point of the text to be unclear. Between Sam and Hailey’s contesting voices and the different narratives that are added by the historical sidebar, it becomes hard to determine how and where to penetrate the quite “loud” surface of the text:

**ONLY REVOLUTIONS BY SAM**

**H** aloes! Haleskarth  
 Contraband!  
 I can walk away  
 from anything.  
 Everyone loves  
 the Dream but I kill it.  
**Bald Eagles** soar over  
 me: *-Reveille Rebel!*  
 I jump free this weel.  
 On fire. Blaze a breeze.

**ONLY REVOLUTIONS BY HAILEY**

**S** amsara! Samarra!  
 Grand!  
 I can walk away  
 from anything.  
 Everyone loves  
 the Dream but I kill it.  
**Atlas Mountain Cedars** gush  
 over me: *-Up Boogaloo!*  
 I leap free this spring.  
 On fire. How my hair curls.

I'll devastate the World.  
 No big deal. New mutiny all  
 around. With a twist.  
 With a smile. A frown.  
 Almighty sixteen and so freeeeee.  
 Rebounding without even a cap.  
**Golden Bears** bow at my knee:  
*-Go ahead Lieutenant General.*  
*Take it all.*  
**American Beavers** also chatter  
 scared. Bowing. Fawning too.  
 Why don't I have a hat?  
 (Danielewski S1)

I'll destroy the World.  
 That's all. Big ruin all  
 around. With a wiggle.  
 With a waggle. A spin.  
 Almighty sixteen and freeeeee.  
 Rebounding on bare feet.  
**Trembling Aspens** are pretty here:  
*-You've nothing to lose. Go ahead.*  
*Have it all.*  
**Tamarack Pines** sway scared.  
 Appalled. Alls pretty. Perfumed.  
 Why don't I have any shoes?  
 (Danielewski H1)

The first pages of *Only Revolutions* give us an impression of Sam and Hailey; two teens ready to abandon the world and put themselves in the center of it. They do not need anybody and each road they choose is theirs to follow. Putting these two texts next to each other we can establish that there is not much difference between the two fragments. In essence the two pages tell the same thing: they are simply sixteen and free. But it is the makeup, the language (notice the abundance of neologisms), that brings the characters alive, breaks them free from the underlying story that they are trying to tell.

Looking closely at the two pages, there are quite a few things that stand out. For instance, Sam's story foregrounds Hailey in such a way that his first chapter starts with an 'H', while Hailey's starts with an 'S'. This causes the relationship between the two stories to appear in the form of a chiasmus which highlights the presence of the characters in each other's stories. Another striking aspect is that, while Sam and Hailey seem to descend from the same mountain and mainly focus on nature in their telling, Sam focuses on animals, while Hailey focuses on flowers.

The importance of these differences is the fact that they allude to character. As mentioned earlier, the pages give us insight into the wants of Sam and Hailey, but it is the way in which they engage with the world that shows the needs. Taking into consideration Sam's focus on animals and looking at how he develops as the story moves along, there is a clear desire for being 'the strong one'. No matter what happens along the way and how many times Sam keeps telling himself that he does not need Hailey, he always comes back to her because of the desire to

protect her. The same can be said for Hailey in as far as her focus on flowers shows how delicate she really is. Being “Allmighty sixteen and freeeeee” means that she can come and go as she pleases, but there seems to be a frightening aspect in that same freedom in that it does not grant her protection from the outside world – that is what Sam is for. This shows that the surface of the story does not only allude to the characteristics that are obvious in Sam and Hailey, but also show how, in the process of actively sketching themselves on the pages, both of the characters are able to show their desires. Desires that ultimately result in them staying together, as they were perfectly designed to fit. The connection between form and content<sup>12</sup>, therefore, doesn’t present an insight into the psychological consequences for the reader, but allows the reader to perceive the psyche of the two narrators.

The first page of this novel, then, does not guide us into a story, but into the surface structure. The way the two stories are positioned on this page is done deliberately, as to show that what the reader perceives of as the beginning of the book is in essence just a way of entering the beginning. It is in the reconstruction of the story through Sam and Hailey’s versions that one gets to the real entry point of the hermeneutic circle: the story that lies underneath. Taking the different elements of the story as it is presented on the page, one is able to distinguish certain parts and find in them the puzzle pieces to reconstruct a whole. This means that the parts of the story need to be constantly reconsidered in order to construct it in its entirety, which is partly due to the unreliability of the two characters<sup>13</sup>.

How *are* we to enter the circle? Right through the middle. The author’s advice brings one to an entry point that seems to be located between the two characters, thereby referring to a surface that cannot be penetrated unless one is able to construct the actual happenings. Starting with either Hailey or Sam, then, is not enough, and reading them one after the other comes close but not quite close enough. The white space between the two narratives as they are positioned on the previous page shows quite physically that the only way to successfully enter the

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<sup>12</sup> Schleiermacher (2010: 534)

<sup>13</sup> While Sam’s ego causes him to portray himself as brave and manly in his monologue, Hailey’s version frequently tells the opposite and vice versa.



hermeneutic circle that is *Only Revolutions* is through the blanks and vacancies that arise while reading. It is through the uncertainties that arise between the voices of Sam and Hailey that one comes to the layer in which the activity of trying to uncover meaning can be set into motion.

The surface of *Only Revolutions* does much more than the page would have one believe. The complex structure that has a strict mathematical basis is able to allude to both the content of the story itself as well as to the structure. The fact that insight into the psyche can also be achieved from the use of language that is attributed to Sam and Hailey, shows that Danielewski has been able to create a work in which everything is connected. The part and whole relationship that was created mathematically, point to the most productive theories<sup>14</sup> for its analysis by drawing attention to how every small part of the work alludes to its entirety.

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<sup>14</sup> Hermeneutics and reader response theory



## II. SURFACE STRUCTURE: THE READER'S ENTRY POINT

It should be clear by now that the goal is not to offer an interpretation of *Only Revolutions*, but to lay bare its structure. This chapter will try to explain how the surface structure, meaning the use of language and the instructions that can be derived from this unconventional usage, work on the side of the reader. Because the reader is in this work not only asked to participate on a psychological level – e.g. emotionally – but also actively by alternating between Sam and Hailey every eight pages, another sort of dialectic between reader and the text is created. The only question that remains is: where does this leave the reader?

In the multiplicity of writing, everything is to be *disentangled*, nothing *deciphered*; the structure can be followed, 'run' (like the thread of a stocking) at every point and at every level, but there is nothing beneath: the space of writing is to be ranged over, not pierced; writing ceaselessly posits meaning ceaselessly to evaporate it, carrying out a systemic exemption of meaning.

(Barthes 1325)

This passage from Roland Barthes explains the primary task of the reader: he is meant to disentangle a text instead of deciphering it. This means that what should be sought out is not one definitive meaning, but multiple ones – which consequently gives one insight into the structure of the text. In the act of reading the reader therefore plays a significant role because he is not only the one who uncovers the structure by actively engaging with the text, but is also the one the text is adapted to. One could say that in order to exist, then, the work needs the reader and therefore can only justify its existence through the activity of the reader in uncovering its system.

The reader is initially able to only operate on a surface level, simply because that is the part of the work he or she has direct access to. The procedure that is started as soon as the book is opened however, is not in essence a form of productivity that starts from the beginning. Only being able to access information in its proceedings throughout the pages, its linearity – and therefore the story – can get lost on the reader. In the process of reading the reader will find him- or herself confused, mostly because of ambiguities that arise in the space between the

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Nov 22 1963  
 – to screaming.  
 – he's gone.  
 Parkland hospital.  
 1:00 PM.  
 Oak Cliff & 2 cartridges,  
 JD Tippit goes.  
 – This is it.  
 Lee Harvey Oswald.  
 – I haven't shot  
 anybody.  
 2:41 PM  
 Love Field.  
 Air Force One. LBJ &  
 Judge Sarah T Hughes.  
 – defend, protect and.  
 – OK, let'S get this  
 plane back to.  
 John W McCormack's  
 security squad.  
 – Serious but not.  
 – a giant Cedar.  
 Broadway.  
 Half-mast.  
 – Would you come  
 with US?  
 – That is all I can do.  
 I ask for your help.  
 – a tragedy for all  
 of US.  
 Dow down 21.16  
 (Only Revolutions H1)

voices of Sam and Hailey. The ambiguities are what prompts the reader to dig deeper, to uncover the truth, to read the text beyond the surface and find the structure that is missing to the eye but is present in its underlying blueprint. It is exactly this relationship between meaning and structure that generates the work, in other words: "what makes it [the text] meaningful also gives it formal unity"<sup>15</sup>.

In order to get into the reader's experience one must first investigate the structure of the pages. Dazzling us with an abundance of words, fonts, colors and upside down text, Danielewski causes the reader to want to start with everything at once and wanting to finish nothing at all. The competing columns that one finds on a page which are ever-present in the corners of the eyes propose a distraction. This page shows this beautifully as the first column containing historical events, that is found in Hailey's retelling, is displayed on the left. This unconventional page layout constantly makes the reader consider its functionality and thereby triggers him or her to create certain connections between the story told and the way in which it is presented on the page. This all in order to derive meaning from the page itself, from its aesthetics.

"What I wanted to do was open it up to the people that I've met. Many people just around me, on the road, as well as those people who participate in forums devoted to *House of Leaves*. And I asked for their favorite historical moment in the last, over the last 200 years, as well as their favorite personal historical moment. And all of those moments, or as many as I could, were poured into the historical columns in the book."

(Book Trailer *Only Revolutions*)

This is a quote from Mark Z. Danielewski himself, taken from an interview about *Only Revolutions* that was part of the first official book trailer. What Danielewski shows here is that he

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<sup>15</sup> Riffaterre (1983: 11)

tried to bring history and reader together in his work, thereby creating a historical context for his reader to place the story of Sam and Hailey in. The only problem is that, at first sight, one does not know what to do with this abundance of information that keeps haunting the left side of every page (until January 18<sup>th</sup> 2006, which is when the book was ready for print). It is only when one gets to the major historical events, that one is able to actually link the historical context to the events that happen.

What must strike the reader at first sight then, is that Sam and Hailey's dates are a hundred years apart. Where Sam's story starts November 22<sup>nd</sup> 1863, we only meet Hailey November 22<sup>nd</sup> 1963, positioning Sam in the Civil War and Hailey in the Civil Rights movement<sup>16</sup>. Seeing as the two are so far apart, their quite early convergence must strike the reader as odd – *if* the connection between historical context and personal story is already made by then. It is at this point that the reader must let go of the desire for linearity and must recognize that what is presented here are two characters running from time, while successfully pulling away from history and, consequently, closer to each other.

It can be quite hard to position Sam and Hailey within the historical context that accompanies them on every page. What can be said is that in positioning their narratives next to the historical columns, preconceptions arise because the history portrayed next to the page *should* give an indication of what is about to happen. This does not seem to be the case and the historical columns can, therefore, feel quite superfluous most of the time. However, every once in a while there is a very clear convergence of history and story. One example of this is when Sam and Hailey find themselves walking through the remains of a children's playground. The allusions made to what has happened here are most clearly linked to the historical background provided in the columns: we are simultaneously experiencing World War One and the Vietnam War. The difference in experience from Sam and Hailey lies only in their naming of the associations and smells that come up when they walk through the cratered playground.

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<sup>16</sup> De Los Reyes (2013)

Until she reaches a  
 Strange Accident of  
 times, burning charnel  
 to the end. Variable dead  
 by Monkey Bars, Sand Box &  
 Slides. Melting.  
 -O beware, **Passenger Pigeons** climb.  
 Yet for this carnage, Hailey stops.  
 Biliou smoke. Dripping fat.  
 On which **Turkey Vultures** gorge.  
 (Danielewski S66)

Until I reach a  
 Strange Accident of  
 times, burning melee  
 for miles. And Ben Tre dead still  
 clutching Tire Swings, SeeSaws &  
 Rings. Smoldering.  
 -O beware, **Wild Grape** twines.  
 Yet for this slaughter, Sam stops.  
 Sacrificial smoke. Crumbling bone.  
 Around which **Tall Corydalis** grow.  
 (Danielewski H66)

Reading both fragments, the allusions to the two wars are quite striking. WWI was a war in which America at first did not wish to participate, but was eventually forced into. One of the most striking consequences of this war was the fact that it brought America a great deal of wealth. While keeping this in mind, reading Sam's description of "Dripping fat. On which **Turkey Vultures** gorge." must allude to the fact that the ending of the war brought a certain prosperity to the American people.

Hailey is placed in the Vietnam War and in her fragment also clearly alludes to this when she mentions Ben Tre. Ben Tre was a city in Vietnam that was attacked by the American army, which was later justified by this famous quote uttered by an anonymous American officer: "It became necessary to destroy the town to save it."<sup>17</sup> Hailey's mentioning of the city, then, clearly positions her in that historical fact. As with Sam, the playground where Hailey arrives is mentioned by naming the play sets that they see. It was the American people that benefited from WWI and the civilians were the one sacrificed in the Ben Tre bombings. Therefore, it is civilian life that is portrayed through situating the two wars at a playground. There is also a connection made between the two wars, which can be brought back to the idea that history is circular. By deliberately putting these two wars together, Danielewski establishes a connection between the two and prompts the reader to look at the differences as well as the similarities between these two major events.

In this example there is a clear connection to be made between the historical column and the events that are described on the page. With the historical column one is, thus, able to exactly

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<sup>17</sup> This Day in Quotes (2012)

pinpoint where Sam and Hailey are in a specific time in the novel. However, as mentioned before, this is not the case throughout the whole novel. The fact that the historical context is put up as a side note, does allude to the idea that because Sam and Hailey are trying to outrun history, it is deliberate that history is separated from them. What the reader does with the historical context, is therefore completely up to him or her. The historical column could be taken into consideration, turning the novel into a thrilling race through 200 years of American history. Were that section of the page to be completely ignored, one would get a complex love story that is beautiful on its own. The choice is up to the reader.

Having established that there is a rupture between historical context and the story told, the reader now has to make sense of the language that is presented to him or her – especially its style. This happens according to the first type of circularity that makes up the hermeneutic circle: the relationship between intuition and analysis<sup>18</sup>. The tools to accomplish this, however, reside on the surface and are presented to the reader as loud, colorful and – especially – unconventional.

The central question here is one of style, which was seen by Schleiermacher as the “manipulation of language”<sup>19</sup>. Meaning that in capturing his own personal style on paper, Danielewski was able to conceive a certain aspect of life in his own way and project that onto his use of language. It is now up to the reader to decipher that language in order to understand what Danielewski means.

The first real difficulty to be encountered is the fact that Danielewski uses very short sentences that do not always logically connect to each other. The result is a string of impressions that – put together – make up a certain image. As mentioned before, language is an important part of this novel because of its unconventional use. It does have a clear function however. One example could be the fact that both Sam and Hailey misspell all words in which the combination “al” can be found. Being free and egocentric sixteen year olds, these “mistakes” can easily be explained by pointing out how exactly they misspell. The word “alone”, for example, is spelled as

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<sup>18</sup> Martin (1972: 100)

<sup>19</sup> Frank (1983: 23)

“allone”. The mistake in this is clear and keeping the characters in mind, one must conclude that what Danielewski does here with this repeated error is show the state of mind of his characters. The reader therefore does not simply get characterization through actions and thoughts, but also through their linguistic expression.

What is also striking is the fact that capital letters seem to be used randomly. The first idea that would come to mind would be the German use of capital letters for nouns, but there seems to be no grammatical motivation for this. That would also mean that there would have to be a lot more capital letters, which is not the case. The reader is left to wonder what the purpose is of this throughout the whole book, being only able to solve this mystery by simply stating that its function is to highlight a particular word. What can be pointed out is the fact that capital letters are often used in the flora and fauna that Sam and Hailey use to bring across their story. An explanation could therefore be that by constantly inserting something that is very true to themselves, the characters are able to anchor themselves in the stories they tell. Their intention throughout the whole novel, however, is to break free from that history.

The cursives in the work are used to represent quotes, which is quite clear and therefore helps the reader distinguish between what is said and what is thought. Although the cursives have a very clear function, one keeps coming back to that one question in the back of one’s head: why the green and golden o’s? And the answer is never given. Assumed could be that it is simply the eye of the other character, representing its presence in the other’s story by the reoccurrence of their eye. Here one could refer back to the hermeneutic circle. This reoccurrence of circularity in both form, layout and language only stresses the circularity of the work itself and actively contributes to figuring out the whole of *Only Revolutions* by constantly representing it on the micro-level.

This is what the reader goes through while reading the novel. There is more room left for questions than for answers on every page and even though the reader is presented with an abundance of information, it is simply not enough – or maybe just too much? What can be recognized is that Danielewski creates two separate forces that work their influence on each



page, meaning that the representation of the characters and that of the events (omitting the historical column for a moment) get their distinct language and voice on the page. This separates the character from his or her surroundings, putting in practice on the page what the characters want to achieve in the story: get away from the world and pulling themselves out of history, positioning them in a timeless loop in which their love for each other is the only certainty.



### III. STORY STRUCTURE: AN OPTICAL ILLUSION

Now that the surface has been penetrated and a point of entry has been established, it is time to move on to the structure of the story, the level on which the hermeneutic circle should operate. As this theory has already been explained at length, let it suffice to say that the part and whole connection – how do the different parts of the story connect to each other? How do Sam and Hailey connect to each other? – will be the main focus.

What is first brought to the reader's attention is the fact that in alternating between Sam and Hailey there does not seem to be very much difference in the events they describe. If Sam arrives at a party and meets certain people, Hailey is very likely to go through the exact same experience. This occurs not only because the two are characterized as egocentric and therefore position themselves at the center of everything, but also because the timetable according to which Danielewski wrote the story allows for certain events to come together while their focus may shift. It does happen that Sam and Hailey go their separate ways, which causes the narratives to differ from each other in order to show the whole story. This means that while the event is the same, the perspective does change significantly. Usually, however, this is not the case and it is exactly the repetition – how it occurs and how there is difference in repetition – that will be most important for this chapter.

What must be stressed in this aspect is the fact that Danielewski does not mirror history exactly. While both Sam and Hailey's narratives start in '63 the two are 100 years apart, positioning Sam in the 1800s and Hailey in the 1900s. This gives the impression that the book will continue on connecting the exact same dates from the two centuries together and through that connection create an historical web that is supposed to bring the two characters together by maintaining the same distance (temporally, in this case) between them. However, Danielewski does not follow his created time table exactly, which means that the parallel he creates in the book does not reside in the time that separates the two. A shift that takes place in the historical columns as one proceeds in the book, makes it so that physically – on the page – Sam and Hailey

always seem to be the same distance removed from each other, while the proceeding of history proves otherwise<sup>20</sup>.


The importance of this is that it allows Danielewski to connect historical events to each other as he pleases, which consequently presents the reader with a lot of binary oppositions. Being able to choose freely which events from the two different centuries are connected to each other, allows Danielewski to bring major historical events together and show how they differ and what their similarities are. The common assumption is that history repeats itself, which is strengthened by the fact that the book is in itself circular. By taking together similar events and describing them through Sam and Hailey, the events are linked to each other while at the same time contributing to the characterization of the two narrators. After all, it is exactly their history, their frame of mind that is anchored in time and makes them who they are.

Therefore, it is safe to assume that the historical column does not only show American history in a nutshell – while also showing its repetitive structure – but also contributes to the stories told by Sam and Hailey because it provides a background that can only be understood and processed through the narrative of one character at a time. It is their exact spot in history that makes them the perfect narrator for that single event in that specific time frame. Sam and Hailey's narratives do not really differ in terms of events that happen, but in the differences in perception, and thus, the right question to ask is not “are these reliable narrators?,” but “are these reliable narratives?”

Being able to connect historical events as he pleases, while also having them described by two very different narrators, Danielewski creates a narrative in which the truth proves hard to uncover. This does bring attention to the fact that even in retelling history one is not sure what is to be believed and what not, because who is to say that the way it is described in the history books is the way it really went? Ultimately, even history is memory and memory is not always reliable.

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<sup>20</sup> See analysis in chapter 2

In the space between the narratives there must exist some common ground, and it does as the physical context of the events stays the same (for example, the place in which it occurs). What accounts for the significant differences, is the historical context. Which means that there is a steady middle from which the two characters distance themselves because of their historical position and it is this movement that causes the gaps between the narratives to be made. This can all be demonstrated beautifully by thinking back to the book's logo . The fact that the two parallels – and therefore the narratives as well as the characters – never meet, is because of the primal condition which determines that the only common ground that can be found between the two characters and their stories lies beyond their reach. An example:

*Jan 13 1874* Yet despite their retreat,  
 Crime of 73. she officiously skips closer:  
 Vanderbilt, –Over here fellas!  
 Czar of New York Rail. And EIGHTEEN TRAPPERS all leap  
 Adolpho Coors. appalled with Whirligigs and  
 Tompkins Park riot. Bilbo Catchers:  
 Congress repeals salary raise. –Get lost.  
 Morrison R Waite. TWENTY RANCHERS turn their  
 Blanche K Bruce. backs on this mewling reprobate.  
 Lokomaikai goes. Whipping Tops for Pickup Sticks:  
 Garnet Wolseley's Kofu Kari-Kari & human sacrifices. –Get lost now.  
 Emma, David Kalakaua & Honolulu riot. THESE THIRTY-SIX PROSPECTORS  
 Freight Rates & Capturing The Flag by  
 Granger Laws. holusbolus Tag & Roundabout:  
 Grant vetoes Legal Tender Act. –Get lost. Now.  
 Ten Hour Act. THESE NINETY HARD ROCK FARMERS  
 Ashfield Dam & even threatening to brutally  
 Mill River, over 100 go. repulse her clutch. Rover Rover  
 Gold & Dakota Territory. Come On Over. Fireworks & fuse.  
 Bolivia-Chile border. And Hailey still lunges for a boot.  
 Beecher, Tilton & Elizabeth. Astounding all around  
 –Meet brute force with brute force. with a mouthful of dirt.  
 Grasshoppers & Great Plains. (Danielewski S13)  
 Turkey Wheat.  
 Britain annexes Fiji.

And also their gyre's screw.  
 Though I still tear loose of this crew.  
 –Tootaloo girls!  
 And EIGHTEEN NEWLYWEDS wash  
 pale while Double Dutching and  
 buzzing Yo Yos:  
 –O hang on.  
 TWENTY DIVORCÉES cluster  
 around on their knees.  
 TicTacToing for Tiddly Winks.  
 –O hang on please.  
 THESE THIRTY-SIX RISING CAREERS,  
 Hula Hooping on Wheelbarrows  
 for Jelly Rolls:  
 –O hang on. Please.  
 THESE NINETY FIRED & UNEMPLOYED  
 slimpering for some participation.  
 All On One Side. All're all turned  
 around. Fireworks & ice.  
 I'm no consolation. I'm the heist.  
 The impersonal price.  
 Playing hooky. (Danielewski H13)

In this fragment, Sam and Hailey are passing several groups of people engaged in several different activities. They both encounter the same amounts of people (18, 20, 36 and 90) and they move through the event at the same pace. What might not be very clear on this page is the fact that in Sam's narrative Hailey only encounters men, while in Hailey's narrative the groups

consist of women<sup>21</sup>. This is a quite striking difference between the two narratives, because it presents us with a binary opposition regarding the same event and, therefore, conjures up the question why this particular difference is added by Danielewski.

Looking at the historical columns accompanying the pages, the first event immediately strikes us: Crime of 73. Further investigation shows how the Crime of 73<sup>22</sup> consists of reforming the monetary system in which the gold standard was adopted. The fact that gold was more valuable caused minor coins to become obsolete, which in effect made it so that money was less accessible as its price rose. This lack of access of course had an impact on the wealth and allows to contextualize the events in Sam's narration much better. The descriptions used to characterize the people he meets, all have something to do with the job market or some sort of wealth. The historical event titled "Congress repeals salary raise," then, is a good explanation for what happens on the page and therefore justifies the way in which Sam experiences this particular event. There is an economical crisis going on which falls on the shoulders of the men.

When we get further down the page, however, we come across the Tender Act and, most importantly, the Ten Hour Act. The Ten Hour Act<sup>23</sup> was an act which said that women and children working in factories were not allowed to work more than ten hours per workday. Seeing as the law did not include men, one could conclude that the fact that Hailey is subsequently scared away by the men must have something to do with this new inequality that had risen on the job market. Therefore, there is no room for Hailey in the activities the men are engaged with. It is not her historical crisis to experience, it is not her inequality to bear. The fact that it is Sam who exists in the 1800s, then, can in this respect be explained by the fact that in American history the 1800s were very male orientated, while in the 1900s women start to find a voice for themselves.

This said, the fact that Hailey meets women is not only justified because she lives in the 1900s, but precisely because her historical position in the fragment is January 11, 1964. This is when the women's movement was becoming prominent in America. Women were fighting for

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<sup>21</sup> Mentioned on the previous page

<sup>22</sup> "Coinage Act of 1873." (2013)

<sup>23</sup> "Factories Act 1847."(2013)

their rights, taking their discontent with society and the way in which they were treated to the streets in an attempt to get the same rights as men had. The transformation that can be seen in Hailey's narrative, therefore, illustrates how this fighting for one's rights proceeds. Whereas the first group she encounters consists of solely newlyweds – who are starting to use contraception, as birth-control was introduced in the sixties –, the next group consists of divorcees, followed by rising careers. After all, it was in the sixties that women improved their participation on the job market (even though the differences in salaries remained)<sup>24</sup>. This shows that women were getting more independent as the sixties proceeded. The fact that Hailey is almost begged to join in the activities, shows how she is an integral part of that history (albeit so because of her gender).

The historical columns allow the reader to position Sam and Hailey within history and thereby make sense of the events described on the page. Circularity is here represented in the fact that both arrive at the big wars of their century and go through that experience together, but also because the repetitive nature of history is highlighted in this aspect. This validates the conclusion that the work is in itself not circular, but it is its contents (the story supported by the historical columns) and the page layout that force this circularity upon the work. Pulling it apart has shown that the novel itself invokes merely an illusion of circularity because of the tools which Danielewski has carefully chosen and put to use in a highly structured manner. Because in the end, it always comes down to precisely that: structure.

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<sup>24</sup> Walsh (2013)





## CONCLUSION

Thinking back to the quote from Danielewski used in the introduction, in which he states that the theory to explain *Only Revolutions* has yet to be invented, the differences between the two narratives do pose a significant problem. It is true that the surface structure of *Only Revolutions* is a circular one, this effect is even strengthened by the author's advice to alternate between Sam and Hailey every eight pages. But seeing as the two narratives do not move according to the same pace – which must have been done deliberately in order to create certain binary oppositions in the narrative, as shown in chapter three – the circularity that is projected upon the story must be precisely that: a projection.

The way in which Danielewski consciously connects certain events to each other, creates the idea that underneath the surface of major events – such as the example of WWI and the Vietnam War – must lie a common base. The reciprocal transformation that occurs while reading *Only Revolutions*, therefore, does not only create purely theoretical hermeneutic circles that can be found on part of the reader and the connection between the different segments of Sam and Hailey's narratives. Another circle can be found in the proceedings of history, which Danielewski is able to demonstrate by putting those events together that show which stages America had to go through in order to turn into what it is today.

Referring back to the fragment analyzed in chapter three and keeping in mind the fact that what Danielewski does is present a common base from which his two characters turn away and create their narratives, one can conclude that *Only Revolutions* does not consist of 360°, but merely 180°. If the common historical base is what provides the characters with a framework to project their individual historical backgrounds on, the projection can only exist on a parallel level through which that common base can still be identified. Doing this for both characters and perceiving their movement as one away from a certain center, the circle that *Only Revolutions* is said to be is merely the American history from which Sam and Hailey are trying to break free – something in which they never succeed. The parallels that consist of the two narratives that are never able to touch each other, then, evolve around a vacancy that takes on different forms and

adapts to every historical event that is discussed in the book. The middle can never be found, because it keeps shifting due to the never ending loop in which it is forced to function.

The correct calculation that can be made for *Only Revolutions*, therefore, identifies American history as the circle – consisting of  $360^{\circ}$  – in which the two parallels created by the narration of Sam and Hailey can only consist of  $180^{\circ}$ , because otherwise we would have two complete narratives (which is not the case). Consequently, the common base from which the two start their narratives can only exist on an angle of  $90^{\circ}$ . Sam and Hailey can be so different in their descriptions, that the author has a good point when advising to alternate between the two in order to get the whole story. But this also proves that none of them tell a complete story and that therefore the circularity of the narrative does not reside in the way in which it is told by the characters.

It is the surface structure that forces circularity on the work. The layout makes the reader believe that simply connecting the dots while reading will lead to an all-encompassing circle in which the story will make absolute sense. The circularity that is brought up as a motivation for the statement that this novel is impenetrable by existing theory, therefore, simply does not exist. The circularities that can be found in the work lie in the operating of the hermeneutic circle on a textual level, an historical level, and the blanks and vacancies that create a reciprocal – circular – activity on the part of the reader. All of this in order to reconstruct the whole story that consists of a retelling of American history through the eyes of two rebellious teenagers.

What *Only Revolutions* does, is make the reader believe that it is circular because of its complex presentation. Danielewski has therefore proven that traditional devices can be used to create something quite extraordinary. He prompts the reader to take action and reconsider its position within the activity of reading because of the unconventional instructions that come with the book. By positioning two linear narratives next to each other and have the surface force a certain circularity upon it, he also creates confusion with the reader, and it is exactly this feeling

of not knowing what to expect and how to treat the novel that must account for the obsessions it has generated.

In effect, the conclusion must be that *Only Revolutions* simply cannot 'fit'. It is exactly in the discrepancies between the historical events that are positioned together and the whimsical characters of Sam and Hailey, that a space is created in which the reader is encouraged – some may even say doomed – to wander because of the impossibility of effectively connecting use of language, page layout and actual storytelling together. Sam and Hailey are never forever sixteen, it is the way in which their narratives are given their actual shape that grants them immortality – but only in a structural loop that continues long after the two have climbed the mountain and died in the America they both so dread.

The use of hermeneutics proved to be very important and productive, because it was in distinguishing the parts from the whole of the novel, that I was able to show that the circularity of the novel is not to be found in its physicality, but in its theoretical framework. Connecting the novel to the reader proved to be helpful not only because this approach complemented hermeneutics by showing the dialogue in which the reader and text engage, but because it also allowed to distance oneself from the text in order to distinguish the processes that work on the surface level. Taking the text and reader together and looking at how hermeneutics and reader response theory could complement each other, then, allowed for a thorough analysis in which not only the individuality of contemporary literature was challenged, but also the relevance of older theories for contemporary research.



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