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What role do fate and free will play in *Out Stealing Horses*, and how is this conveyed?

Per Petterson's *Out Stealing Horses* follows the main character, Trond Sander, as he reflects on the summer of 1948 and how the events of that year impact the rest of his life. By drawing parallels between Trond's life and fictional events, and by showing Trond's catastrophist outlook, Petterson explores the dichotomy of fate and free will, which is emphasised using intertextual allusions to other works as well as through the novel's setting and structure. Through the events of the novel and how these affect Trond, Petterson reveals that Trond's attempts to fully control his life are misguided, though not entirely futile.

Throughout the novel, particularly when describing chance occurrences, Trond compares his life to a work of fiction. When Lars Haug, younger brother of Trond's friend, Jon, accidentally shoots his brother, Odd, Trond notes that 'if this had been something that happened in a western' it would claim that Odd's death 'was written in the stars or ... in the fat book of Destiny', and that 'powers other than those controlled by man' were responsible (p. 48). More than fifty years later, after Trond realises that his neighbour is the very same Lars, he notes that 'if this had been something in a novel', the coincidence would have seemed 'irritating' and 'far-fetched' (67). Trond makes a similar comparison when leaving for Oslo, saying that it was 'as if [he] had been thoroughly rehearsed in [a] film', where the 'lives of the protagonists' are destined to be 'changed forever' (128). By comparing the fateful episodes in Trond's life, both in cause and effect, to predestined occurrences in fictional works, Petterson suggests that fate may be an important component of the characters' lives, and cements the role of fate

as one of the key themes of the novel.

Petterson emphasises this theme through the use of intertextual allusions throughout the novel. Reflecting on his happenstance meeting with Lars, Trond says that such coincidence 'may be all very well in Dickens ... where everything has to come together in the end' (67). Trond's daughter, Ellen, notes that Trond was 'always reading Dickens' (217), and Trond explicitly references two of Dickens' works within the novel. Firstly, Trond describes the ending of *A Tale of Two Cities*, paying particular attention to how 'the women knitting in the stalls' count the criminals as they are guillotined (180), foretelling the fate of the novel's protagonist, Sydney Carton. Elsewhere in *A Tale of Two Cities*, knitting seals the fate of those whose names Madame Defarge knits into her register, condemning them to be killed by the revolutionaries. Trond also ponders Dickens' *David Copperfield*, whose opening lines question 'Whether [David] shall turn out to be the hero of [his] own life' (218), and Tolstoy's '*Hadji Murat*' (124), describing the deterministic inevitability of defeat. Trond's references to these fateful events and limits to free will reiterate the importance of fate in *Out Stealing Horses*, and through Trond's attachment to these texts, Petterson highlights the role of fate in Trond's life in particular.

Trond, however, disagrees with this assessment of the world. After likening Odd's death to a destined event in a western, Trond claims that 'that was not how it was', but instead merely an unfortunate accident (48). Similarly, after describing the role fate plays in the denouement of Dickens' novels, Trond asserts that 'Real life [is] something different' (219) and rejects the notion that 'our lives are governed by fate', but instead takes 'complete responsibility' for his life, believing that 'we shape our lives ourselves' (68). Petterson shows Trond's desire to have control over his life through his characterisation of Trond as a planner and catastrophiser, for example, when he cuts the branches off a log 'so that nothing would ... injure' anyone (81), or when he plans to replace his floorboards 'before someone falls through and breaks a

leg' (200). Petterson further illustrates Trond's fixation with control through his repetition of the mantra 'You decide for yourself when it will hurt' as a motif (29). Trond applies this mantra not only to physical pain, as when he says he'd 'make up [his] own mind when it should hurt' (62), but also to emotional trauma, as when he chooses to live alone after the deaths of his wife and sister to avoid future loss, saying that by living in solitude, 'No-one can touch you unless you yourself want them to' (73–74). Through Trond's actions, Petterson conveys an alternative view to that seen in the fictional works: that free will plays a much more important role than fate, and that it is therefore possible to direct one's own future.

Nevertheless, Trond's faith in his control is contradicted by the events of the novel. In spite of the significant measures Trond takes to shield himself from others, his daughter, Ellen, is nevertheless able to find and admonish him for his behaviour. This confrontation, which 'was not part of [Trond's] plan', causes him to have an epiphany as he realises with 'sudden terror' that his approach has been misguided (222). A similar reminder of Trond's past is his aforementioned unexpected meeting with Lars, which forces Trond to face his past and his father's betrayal. Despite claiming that his world is 'not like' the neat, fateful world of Dickens, Trond laments that 'of all the places [he] might have moved to, [he] had to land up precisely here' (68), and later admits to having wondered 'How such a thing is possible' (172). Through these coincidences and fateful events, Petterson undermines Trond's beliefs and his mantra, demonstrating that Trond is misguided in believing he can control his life.

Petterson highlights the presence of fate in Trond's life through other aspects of the novel, such as its setting. In 1948, Trond frequently spends time with his father in the forest, often fishes with Jon in the nearby river, and lives close to the Swedish border where his father escaped with Jon's mother four years earlier. In 1999, Trond's home is also close to a forest, a trout-filled river, and the Swedish border. This parallelism shows how, consciously or not, Trond is drawn to his past in choosing where to live, and foreshadows how, despite

Trond's planning, he is forced to confront this past. Petterson further emphasises the effects of fate in *Out Stealing Horses* through its structure and narrative perspective. By switching back and forth between 1999 and 1948, the reader is aware from early in the novel that Trond's father 'vanished from [his] life forever' at fifteen (76). Additionally, since the events of 1948 are told from the perspective of Trond as a 67-year-old with the benefit of hindsight, Trond foreshadows or spoils many other plot points, such as when he says he 'Clearly ... ought to have understood there was something special about that July morning' (18) on the day Jon suffers a sudden breakdown. Similarly, Trond confirms that leaving on the bus at the end of 1948 'was the last time' he and his father 'saw each other' (128). By providing the reader with such foreknowledge through these narrative prolepses, Petterson heightens the sense that the events in the novel are destined to occur.

Petterson's portrayal of the power of fate over Trond's life, however, is not entirely black and white. Referring to unexpected events such as those precipitated by fate, Trond's father's final piece of advice is that 'that's life. ... You just have to take it in ... and never grow bitter' (127). When Trond puts aside his desire to have full control over his own life, and takes up his father's advice to accept the unexpected, his life is benefited, evident when Trond, faced with an unfamiliar and uncomfortable situation in Sweden, considers the 'different roads [he] could take' (258) and resists his urge to throw a punch. Reflecting on this decision, Trond notes that if he 'had punched the man in Karlstad, [his] life would have been a different life, and [he] a different man' (258–259). In spite of the occurrence of events outside his control, Trond is nevertheless able to direct his own life through the way he chooses to respond to these events. Petterson highlights the important role of free will in these decisions with the ending of the novel, which reaffirms that 'we do decide for ourselves when it will hurt' (264), and which, unlike the fate-filled Dickens' novels Trond frequently references, does not conclude neatly: does not 'come together in the end like an equation' (67). Through these critical events in

Trond's life, Petterson demonstrates the important role of free will in reacting to unexpected occurrences.

In *Out Stealing Horses*, Per Petterson explores the role that fate and free will play in life. Through allusions to fictional works, Petterson emphasises the role of fate in life, while through the events of the novel, as well as its setting and structure, Petterson demonstrates that Trond's belief that he is the sole master of his own destiny is based on false premises. At the same time, however, Petterson reveals with Trond's actions that, regardless of whether fate is real, fateful events do occur, showing the importance of how one chooses to respond.

[Word Count: 1492]

References

Page numbers from:

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Reflective Statement

Through the interactive oral, I increased my understanding of the culture and society in which *Out Stealing Horses* is set.

Through discussion with other students, I learned of various differences between Norwegian culture and my own, such as that evident in the different approach to criminal justice displayed in Norwegian prisons, with less focus on punishment and greater focus on rehabilitation than that found in our own prisons. This enhanced my understanding of Norwegian culture and raised my awareness of the different social norms depicted in *Out Stealing Horses*.

Another aspect of the novel's Norwegian setting discussed during the interactive oral was the difference between urban and rural areas. Having lived in cities for all my life and thus having had little experience of rural areas, listening to students who had such experience allowed me to better understand the rural setting of *Out Stealing Horses* and the norms unique to such rural areas, such as the tighter social networks and resultant greater sense of community.

During the interactive oral, the setting of the novel as during and after the invasion and occupation of Norway in World War II was also discussed. Having never experienced a war in which I or my country was directly threatened, discussion with the other students allowed me to better understand the contextual considerations of the setting, in particular the social problems during this time, such as the residual tension between individuals resulting from their actions during the war.

The interactive oral also helped me better understand the issues surrounding communication and language faced in the novel by Trond and his mother, when they travel to Sweden. I was previously vaguely aware of the mutual intelligibility of Norwegian, Swedish and Dan-

ish, however, being a native speaker of English, I have had no first-hand experience of such phenomena on such a scale. Through discussion with other students, some of whom had experience of mutual intelligibility with their own languages, I was able to better understand the challenges faced by the characters of *Out Stealing Horses* in communicating, despite this characteristic.

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