

A Liminal Existence, Literally:

A Deconstruction of Identity in Diana Wynne

Jones' *Howl's Moving Castle*

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Abstract

This essay examines the inherent instability present in Diana Wynne Jones' 1986 novel *Howl's Moving Castle*. I suggest that in relying on the ambiguity of the story and the setting, Jones creates not only a more complex universe, but allows the characters to be multi-dimensional -- both literally and figuratively -- without having any stable selves. Using deconstruction as a (non-existent) foundation for my analysis, I contend that the strength of the story is in the looseness of it. Thus, by using a Derridean approach with added Cixousian feminist elements and a heap of Kristevian intertextuality, I further argue that Jones invites the reader to embrace the ambiguity of identity by closely analyzing the conflicting behaviours of the two main characters in the novel, Sophie Hatter and Wizard Howl. In conclusion, I argue that Diana Wynne Jones through subverting classic fairy tale tropes in an ingenious way, suggests that there is no such thing as a final finished growing person and that there is comfort to be found in embracing this incompleteness.

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1. Introduction

Diana Wynne Jones once said: “[g]enre, and talk of genre, irritates the hell out of me, actually. I do not see why something should be the sole property of one type of book and not of another” (Butler, “Interview” 166). This is a significant quote since fantasy -- the genre in which she was most active -- has often been considered lesser in terms of literary relevance. This might be because a great deal of fantasy is aimed at children, and there is a certain insidious and condescending view on the make-believe that constitutes fantasy writing. This view, however, is not as often imposed on two closely related genres, that is, science-fiction and horror. What sets fantasy apart from them, meanwhile, is difficult to define. In general terms, fantasy is supposed to lack a scientific aspect omnipresent in science-fiction, as well as the macabre aspect that distinguishes horror. This is of course a simplification of what distinguishes the genres, and their unstable definition serves as a point-of-entry to this essay.

To make matters even more difficult, the subject of this essay is not as well-known as it should be. Diana Wynne Jones’ *Howl’s Moving Castle (HMC)* is a semi-forgotten classic sort-of fantasy novel first published in 1986, and was, in the same year, the runner-up for the Boston Globe-Horn Book Award. Despite this and other accolades, the novel -- and to an extent Jones herself -- have never gotten as much recognition as they arguably deserve. This led to the novel winning the Phoenix Award in 2006, an award given to books that have risen from relative obscurity since their publication.

The “sort-of” caveat is important, as Jones moves freely between the genres of fantasy and science-fiction. It should be mentioned at the outset that to explain the plot of the novel in a straightforward way could be considered an almost impossible task, as the novel simply refuses to have anything to do with straightforwardness, only partially because of the aforementioned genre issue. The story is ostensibly about an adventure in a magical world where things are, “only true in a manner of speaking” (Jones 85). The story deals with the common themes associated with adventure novels, but also adds questions of identity and the self, freedom and appearances. A humorous tone is set at the beginning, on the first page, where the satirical and metafictional nature of the novel is clear as it introduces the protagonist Sophie:

In the land of Ingary, where such things as seven-league boots and cloaks of invisibility really exist, it is quite a misfortune to be born the eldest of three. Everyone

knows you are the one who will fail first, and worst, if the three of you set out to seek your fortunes.

Sophie Hatter was the eldest of three sisters (Jones 1).

At the start of the novel, Sophie is an 18-year-old unpaid apprentice in her late father's hat shop. Unbeknownst to Sophie, however, is the fact that she has a magic ability to speak life into things. Sophie believes in all the myths of Ingary, such as the one mentioned in the paragraph above, that is because she is the eldest of three, she is destined to fail. This belief causes her to not question anything or try to make something of herself. One day, the Witch of the Waste enters the hat shop and puts a curse on Sophie that turns her into an old woman. This acts as a catalyst for Sophie to leave her life behind and to try to find a way to break the curse.

Sophie forces her way into the castle that has appeared on the hill outside of her hometown of Market Chipping, where it seemingly moves about on a whim. The castle belongs to the horrible Wizard Howl and Sophie has heard rumours in the hat shop while working that Howl abducts young women and either eats their hearts or their souls. She believes the gossip just as easily as she believes in anything she hears that is repeated enough times.

Sophie also believes that since she is now old she is safe from Howl since, "Wizard Howl is not likely to want my soul for his collection. He only takes young girls" (35). She meets Michael, Howl's apprentice, and Calcifer, a fire demon that functions as the heart(h) of the Castle. Sophie quickly learns that nothing is as it appears: The Castle is in fact just a small house on the inside; Howl does not eat hearts, but asks Michael to spread these rumours in Market Chipping so that he does not have to do any work; and the door to the castle opens to four different places, only three of which are located in Ingary. Howl seemingly spends most of his time avoiding work and pursuing women, something which enrages Sophie.

However, Howl is himself cursed too, his curse being interwoven with the John Donne poem "Song: Go and Catch a Falling Star," every line of which acts as a prophecy. The poem reveals that the fourth location that the castle door leads to is Howl's own world of modern-day Wales, where he seemingly is a deadbeat younger brother squandering his PhD. In Wales the poem leads to Miss Angorian, Howl's nephew's English teacher, and the latest woman to rise the ire of Sophie when Howl shows interest in her. The poem/curse shifts the until then meandering narrative and drives the plot towards the finale, in which it is revealed -- among other things -- that Howl gave his heart to Calcifer to save him; that Sophie has been keeping

herself old without realizing it; that the Witch of the Waste metaphorically wants Howl's heart, so that they can rule together, while the witch's fire demon, who is revealed to be Miss Angorian, wants Howl's heart literally, to replace the witch's old decrepit heart. In the end, Sophie does more of the work in defeating the witch and Miss Angorian than Howl, saves Howl's life in the process and agrees with Howl that they "ought to live happily ever after" (328).

It should perhaps be noted that the 2004 film adaptation directed by Hayao Miyazaki will only be mentioned in passing, and otherwise gleefully ignored. The film, although critically acclaimed, diverts from the source material to such an extent that I argue that it becomes unnecessary to compare the two for the purpose of this essay¹. Additionally, the two sequels to the novel will not be analyzed, as they are only loosely connected to the story and characters of the book, essentially only sharing the same universe.

As a satire of common fairy tale² tropes, the novel has many staples of its story in common with fairy tales such as Cinderella. There is not only a stepmother and stepsisters, but most of the novel takes place in a world where magic is commonplace. Jones uses this presupposed knowledge of fairy tales to subvert the expectations and surprise the reader. In playing around with the tropes of the classically canonical gendered Cinderella narrative and changing it to make the main female character neither passive nor compliant, the novel is able to both embrace its fairy tale origins while pointing out the discrepancies and potential dangers of embracing fairy tales without questioning them at all.

Although there has been scholarly work done on Jones' many novels, very little of it has focused on *HMC*. This essay aims to rectify this. More specifically, the analysis will concentrate on the instability and ambiguity of the self with regard to the two main characters, Sophie Hatter and Wizard Howl, and how Diana Wynne Jones uses the setting of the story to suggest that endless possibilities exist in incompleteness by refusing to give any definite answers. The framework is centered on Jacques Derrida's ideas as well as Hélène Cixous' additional work on binary oppositions. I argue that in a subversion of the genre of fairy tale, *Howl's Moving Castle* embraces the fluidity and shows the inherent falseness of the idea of the concept "final identity," by bypassing any moral of the story, offering instead the idea of

¹ While the diversions include some common and understandable issues with adaptation such as removing characters and important plot points, Miyazaki also changes such important aspects as where Howl is from, and the entire personalities of Sophie and Howl which leads to altering the entire main theme of the story until it is unrecognizable.

² Since much of the fantasy genre is derived from fairy tale, and because of the novel's metafictional approach to the story, both terms are used fairly interchangeably throughout this essay.

embracing the ambiguity of the self. I further make the claim that Jones shows the complexity of what it means to be human through her characters.

2. Previous Research

In comparison to authors such as J.K. Rowling, Diana Wynne Jones might be considered forgotten by today's standards. Nevertheless, there are many scholars who agree on the importance of her works and their rightful place as not only important literature, but classic fantasy. For instance, when asking for scholarly work to be submitted for the anthology *Diana Wynne Jones: An Exciting and Exacting Wisdom* published in 2002, Teya Rosenberg writes that the immense response was overwhelming. As previously mentioned, however, most scholars chose to focus on other works by Jones for their study. Therefore, as in-depth work on this novel is scarce, the following articles chosen for this section constitutes a majority of the work done specifically on *HMC*. Since they focus on several aspects, the complexity and originality of Jones' novel is evident, which naturally means it is an excellent choice for additional analysis.

Farah Mendlesohn argues in her book *Diana Wynne Jones: Children's Literature and the Fantastic Tradition* that Jones is not only an author, but also a critic, "and that her fiction can be viewed as a sustained metafictional critical response to the fantastic" (Mendlesohn xiii). She insists that Jones freely moves between the genres of fantasy and science-fiction -- genres with already blurry lines -- and that Jones emphasizes that which genre a story belongs in is all dependent on the context in the story. Mendlesohn states that *HMC* is a fully immersed fantasy (103). She defines an immersed fantasy as a world where magic is natural and not questioned and known to the protagonists. The reader must simply pick up clues and hints along the way of how that particular world works. This, Mendlesohn explains, becomes particularly important because Howl himself is in fact a foreigner to Ingary, as he is native to Wales. This fact, however, is not relevant for most of the novel, where Ingary is described as if real (88).

Mendlesohn further shows the multilayered complexity present in *HMC* by pointing out that when the three main characters travel into modern-day Wales -- Howl's home world - - the novel also becomes a portal³ fantasy in addition to an immersive one. She states, however, that where a classic portal fantasy relies on the narrator's descriptions of the

³ Mendlesohn identifies a portal fantasy as a fantasy where the characters escape domesticity in exchange for the fantastic (xxxii). A classic example of this is, of course, *the Chronicles of Narnia* by C.S. Lewis.

“foreign” place to be true and accurate, Wales is seen through the eyes of Sophie. Because the novel’s narration still maintains the highly descriptive nature common in fantasy but applying it to Wales instead of a “fantastical” place as is the norm, Jones shows how unreliable the descriptions are (88). This narrative choice renders the mundane as something foreign, and thus subverts the idea that it is somehow the natural state of things. Therefore, Mendlesohn argues that in *HMC*, Jones reveals the “falsely mimetic” nature of these types of fantasy stories, by showing Wales not as the “real” world opposed to the fantastical world of Ingary.

By defining *HMC* as an immersive fantasy story, Mendlesohn states that what differentiates it from other types of fantasy stories is that “it can hold almost any plot” (102). She argues that it is the casual way in which the characters react and accept the fantastical that makes Jones’ work stand apart. In *HMC*, Jones’ descriptions of the mind of the novel’s inhabitants shows that it is a story about how people view themselves and their own world on a larger scale, with the magic not having the same value as the way people construct their lives through stories, as magic is something inherently ingrained and normal in the novel. Consequently, she argues that “Sophie learns to reject the story line she has been handed” (105-106), meaning that Sophie realizes that her assumption that she will fail is incorrect, and that she is now free to decide her own story. She refers to the Donne poem that has been used to curse Howl and that he becomes fully immersed despite not being a native to Ingary when he “learns instead to accept the storyability of his life” (106), using the word storyability to insinuate that Howl’s life follows a specific pattern in regard to story. This interpretation, however, seems an oversimplification of both characters and is not completely accurate, as Sophie never fully abandons her belief and Howl never stops struggling against his curse. My claim will be developed in the analysis.

Additionally, Mendlesohn argues that Jones does not let the reader view the world she creates as exotic, and that to achieve complete immersion in a fantasy novel, the world needs to be complete, and therefore it must contain mundanity (106). In a traditional fantasy, characters escape their domesticity for adventure -- sometimes through a portal of some kind -- but Jones often inverts this idea by putting the fantastic and domestic in the same realm to deepen the immersion. Mendlesohn uses the first meeting of Sophie and Calcifer to show this in action. As Sophie is indigenous to Ingary, her view of the world is one where the fantastic is the norm. Consequently, while Sophie is not expecting to meet Calcifer, “she is not surprised to meet something like him” (108), showing how Jones uses mundanity to truly immerse the reader in the story.

Carolynn E. Wilcox, while reiterating Mendlesohn's idea of how mundane Jones' portrayal of the fantastic is, focuses instead on how it relates to agency and the power of words themselves in "Everyday Magic: Howl's Moving Castle and Fantasy as Sociopolitical Commentary." She argues that Jones uses this mundanity specifically to covertly deal with social and political issues, and that Sophie and the relationships she has function as a way to show the power of personal agency (Wilcox 160). Wilcox argues that by modernizing the fairy tale narrative by having a self-sufficient heroine and inverting the portal-fantasy by making Wales the strange world of wonder, Jones forces the reader to trust Sophie and "accept wholesale [her] interpretations and to rely on the accuracy of her assessment of any given situation" (161).

Wilcox focuses on the character development of Sophie, and how she views herself in the first half of the novel. She argues that Sophie's passivity with regard to her beliefs about being the eldest is not only what robs her of her agency but also what keeps her from seeing her true power before she is cursed. As a young woman Sophie has given up her agency and accepted her perceived duty, and it is this internalization that causes the curse to remain for so long, as it is also self-inflicted (162). When Sophie is cursed, she breaks free of her familial obligations for the first time in her life, and as the story progresses and she is told of and becomes aware of her own magic abilities -- that is, her words -- she learns to direct it to do what she wants it do to, as when she directs her stick to only hurt Miss Angorian, but nobody else. In taking these steps towards empowerment, Wilcox argues that Sophie finds her personal agency, and that it is in doing so that she breaks her own curse, reverting to her younger self (163).

Finally, Wilcox uses the many names and personae used by Howl to escape responsibility in the novel as an additional example of the power and fluidity of meaning of words, and how the novel can be viewed in a deconstructive way. She claims that this evasion of responsibility causes Howl to generate an instability that leads to him to not knowing who he is (164). While Jones does not demand of her main characters to do good with their powers, she contrasts them frequently with characters who do not, and the consequences thereof. Wilcox further describes how Jones establishes the power of words by using the Donne poem to symbolize Howl's ties to his home world and how the words of the poem are the catalyst of the action driving the characters towards the final battle, yet points out the inherent ambiguity in the riddle-like poem's many signifiers (164). She concludes with the idea that by using literary references, "Jones establishes the idea that the boundaries of 'ordinary' life are permeable" (170).

Caroline Webb also discusses the issue of agency and adds the ambiguity that it entails in the novel, but concentrates on Sophie and her old age in and of itself, and not on her magic abilities in “Change the Story, Change the World’: Witches/Crones as Heroes in Novels by Terry Pratchett and Diana Wynne Jones,” where she states that Sophie’s characterization as an old woman is portrayed in unusually and strikingly positive ways (Webb 156). She argues that most fairy tales ignore the freedom of old age because of their assumptions of pre-industrial culture, and that *HMC* thus becomes significant when Sophie is forced to defy the cultural conventions and recreate herself (160). Sophie does not react like an ordinary heroine that would wait to be rescued. According to Webb, “in taking on the physical constraints of the crone, Sophie feels herself free to be personally expressive and so recovers her own agency” (157), as it is only once she is old that Sophie begins to live for herself.

Webb goes on to illustrate the ambiguity that Jones deploys in the novel by pointing out that many things appear contradictory. For instance, although both sisters and stepmother are present, the stepsisters are not “ugly,” nor is the stepmother wicked. Furthermore, they all subvert their own roles as well. According to Webb, this shows that Sophie is wrong in her assumptions of what is true, and her belief regarding what “everyone knows” about being the eldest of three correlates to near certain failure in life will turn out to be wrong. Webb also reiterates Mendelsohn’s idea of storyability, but applies it to old age by stating that Sophie’s constraints as a young woman are directly tied to her belief in the controlling power of story (159), that is, the preconceived notions of what is expected of her. By making Sophie the heroine of her own story, Jones is “critiquing the narrative and social conventions that shape both communal and individual expectations” (158). However, Webb also claims that agency is synonymous with the creation of “individual identity” (160) in the novel, something I disagree with and will return to in my analysis.

In “Building Castles in the Air: (De)construction in Howl's Moving Castle,” David Rudd takes a different approach than both Mendlesohn and Webb, by arguing for the ambiguity, complexity, and ingenuity of the story itself, and how Jones tells it, instead of trying to find answers. He argues that Jones’ skill lies in showing that what is believed to be “solid ground is always prone to dissolution” (Rudd 257), and that she does this by taking her cue from modern interpretations of fairy tales that are based on such male collectors as the Brothers Grimm and showing how easy it is to get stuck in those narrative conventions. Rudd argues that instead of simply inverting the common patriarchal fairy tale structure at the end of the story, Jones suggests a more complicated and unstable ending. Rudd refers, as Wilcox does, to deconstruction, but focuses on the story as a whole and not only with regards to Howl

by claiming that *HMC* is a story whose “ending mark[s] nothing more than a temporary halt to the ongoing dynamics of signification” (257), for while the ending is a happy one, it is barely an ending at all, according to the conventions of fairy tales. This will be elaborated on in the analysis section.

Moreover, Rudd continues to deconstruct *HMC* by focusing on the use of the word “really” in the novel’s introduction, in which Ingary is described as a place where magical objects “really exist.” By using the word “really” to describe something in a fantasy world, Rudd argues that Jones proves that such things can only “really” exist in such a place, that is, a world which cannot by its very definition “really” exist (258). He continues to argue that while Sophie believes in the truth of failing because she is the eldest, it is only her constant repetition of this belief throughout the novel that makes it appear true to her. By testing this idea by making Sophie old, Jones makes Sophie act young because she is now free of the “curse” that ruled her life as the oldest sibling. As Rudd proclaims, “Sophie [is] her own fairy godmother, artfully influencing her own future” (258).

Rudd continues by pointing out how much of a women’s realm Ingary truly is. Not only are the majority of the characters female, but all of them are shown to have their own agency and outwitting the male characters without falling into any stereotypical roles. He states that male characters are not only fewer, but are the ones that are broken, giving the literal example of the Witch of the Waste’s plot to mix and match three of them into one serviceable male (260). Howl himself is a vain dandy-like cowardly liar and a bona fide drama queen. Rudd goes on to explain that by removing this aspect of the character in the 2004 film, and instead making him a debonair hero, the story loses some very important feminist weight (260). By making the ending much more outwardly romantic than the book’s, the film does not break from fairy tale conventions in the way the book does. Rudd argues that the book has a more subversive take on the conventional romantic plot by mentioning the scene where Sophie realizes that she is the one that got caught in the charm designed to attract women that she accidentally put on Howl’s suit. Yet, as the narrator points out and as Sophie well knows, the other not-charmed suit, “seemed to have worked just the same” (Jones 280).

Additionally, Rudd points to examples of Sophie’s semiotic⁴ approach by comparing her and Howl’s magic and by the way in which Sophie violently cleans the castle. Sophie’s magic, which is speaking life into things, is used most often in domestic environments, and is

⁴ Rudd uses Julia Kristeva’s definition of the term, that is, meaning a “maternal, pre-oedipal form of language” (Rudd 261).

contrasted with Howl's magic that is more traditionally spellbased and used in traditionally wizardry ways (Rudd 262). He points out that in heightening the "stereotypical" female behavior to such an extent that Sophie makes the three males in the household feel threatened -- to the point that Howl claims she is "victimizing [them] all," (Jones 74) -- Jones subverts the portrayal of docile domesticity found in fairy tales. In this way, Jones also subverts the traditional role of the female character in a fairy tale as meek and subservient by making one source of Sophie's strength -- cleaning -- something powerful, as opposed to more traditional fairy tales like Cinderella or Snow White, where cleaning *is* what victimizes the protagonist. Rudd continues the Cinderella comparison by adding:

Sophie is subversive of fairy tale orthodoxy in one other key way, too, in that she moves towards the hearth rather than away from it. However, in doing so, she also moves into the driving-seat of the story, ... That is, she becomes the archetypal Mother Goose, spinner of tales: old and opinionated, yet influential (Rudd 262).

Rudd also makes the connection that since what fuels the castle is in actuality Howl's heart, its movement has several meanings. He gives the example of the castle moving towards those in need of shelter, which subverts the traditionally harsh masculine connotations of castles, such as aristocracy and military might and by extension patriarchy. He continues by arguing that Jones subverts the expectations of the reader by also keeping the landscape of Ingary hypertextual by both incorporating the Donne poem and having the characters be aware of their fairy tale existence. Rudd states that Jones is "most consistently deconstructive in her confounding of the patriarchal basis of the fairy tale" (267), by showing how beneficial it is for castles and homes to have less gravitas and in extension become free of their rudimentary paternal ways.

Claudia Mills, finally, focuses instead solely on the constant mobility in *HMC* as a metaphor for the creative process. In "'Bringing Things to Life by Talking to Them': The Creative Power of Story in Howl's Moving Castle," she discusses the fact that the castle and the doorknob within it moves, and that many of the characters frequently change their appearance as well as their minds. She uses the analogy of Sophie's power to speak life into things as a substitute for what a writer does when they create a story. She references a moment in which Sophie's magic misfires, "which is not to say that this life-giving power does not have its limits ... I think it is safe to say that all authors will ruefully recognize this moment" (Mills 2).

In addition, Mills argues that Jones makes the characters in *HMC* aware that they are in a fairy tale world, thus showing the world-shaping power of story. In reality it is traditionally, if archaically, the eldest that is most set for success in life, and in fairy tales this general convention must be shifted and contrasted by making the opposite true. This is then inverted again by the end of the story, “in a dizzying defiance of the literary convention’s defiance of actual expectations” (2). Moreover, by mentioning how annoyed Howl’s nephew is with his homework -- the Donne poem -- in the Wales dimension, Mills argues that while literature dies when it becomes homework, it has power when it is recognized as being something with the power to change lives.

As Mills sees *HMC* as an allegory for the power of story, she claims that the novel itself questions what counts as truth in fiction and by extension, what honesty means as it relates to Howl. For while Howl lies a lot, there are certain things he never lies about, such as his own cowardice, even before he confirms it out loud in the end. The way Howl refuses to let go of his own vanity, then, is Jones directly commenting that it would be a rejection of the art of fiction completely to reject artifice at all (5). By talking life into the world of Ingary, Mills argues that Jones performs a spell of her own by getting the reader to believe in the story fully (5).

The scholarly works treated in this section all have the subversion of fantasy tropes present in *HMC* as a recurring thought throughout their arguments. Nonetheless, the scope is either too broad, too narrow or focused on elements of Diana Wynne Jones’ novel that I believe hinders the works to go into depth in their character analysis. That being said, David Rudd’s work on deconstruction presented above is instrumental for my own analysis and functions as a partial foundational jumping-off point. Thus, my focus is on the instability of the characters’ selves, and how that is shown as it relates to the ambiguity of identity and by extension how that affects the story.

3. Theoretical Framework

This section begins with an overview of Jacques Derrida’s theories of deconstruction and how they can be used to view the inherent instability and ultimate unclear meaning of language. In an attempt to ground his theories in a linear coherent fashion -- of which I am well aware of the irony -- Lois Tyson’s *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide* is used as a backdrop, and although not explicitly quoted in this framework, deserves much credit. The main focus is on Derrida’s ideas that nothing exists outside of language, and what that can

mean for the construction of identity, and by extension, the construction of characters. In relation to this, his deconstruction of structuralist binary oppositions and their hierarchical status will be explained and used avidly in the analysis. These ideas are then built upon by adding Hélène Cixous' additional work on binary oppositions as not only hierarchies, but patriarchal ones, and what that can mean when used in the reading of a fairy tale text such as *HMC*.

Deconstruction was introduced by Jacques Derrida in the late 1960s and was a major influence on literary studies a decade later. In deconstructive criticism, language is something that is fluid and ambiguous (Tyson 236). The structuralist definition of sign, signifier and signified is upended in deconstruction, which claims that the signified is in actuality just a chain of signifiers. Structuralist theory says that language does not refer to the thing but only the concept of the thing, and calls language nonreferential. Deconstruction, however, goes further by saying that language does not even refer to the concept of the thing, but only to the string of signifiers which makes up language, that is, what it does refer to is only another reference (238). Additionally, deconstruction claims that meaning seems to only be established when words and things are distinguished as different from other words and things. Derrida refers to this as trace, that is, for a word to have meaning, it needs to carry a trace of all the signifiers that word is not. He therefore coined the term *différance*, for when signifiers continually defer meaning and also differ in meaning (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 23).

Language, then, has two important characteristics, in deconstructive criticism (Tyson 245). The first one is that the signifiers continually postpone meaning, that is, a true meaning cannot be reached as the chain of signifiers can always be continued and more meanings and connotations can be added (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 49). The second is that meaning seem to rely on the difference between signifiers and how they are distinguished from each other. This means that for something to have meaning, it needs to be put in relation to another something. For deconstruction, language is what forms people and there is no way to exist outside of it; as Derrida states, "there is no outside-text" (*Of Grammatology* 158).

Derrida says that logocentrism -- that is, a belief that views words and language as fundamental and existent in an external reality -- as a "ground of being" is Western philosophy's greatest illusion, as no concept can be independent of language (Tyson 242). In deconstruction language cannot be considered something stable. To Derrida then, there is no concept outside the instability of language. As no "ground of being" truly exists in deconstruction because of the instability of language, deconstruction thereby renders language non-foundational. In addition, as there is no outside-text, this means that humans are

constituted by language, and they, along with everything else, are what deconstructionists call texts (243). Therefore, deconstruction is significant when it comes to subject formation and what it means to be human. The idea of identity is an illusion, and there is no one true self, and therefore, if identity is constructed -- that is, invented -- it means that it can be reinvented (244). This idea will be explored in the analysis section.

Furthermore, Derrida also expanded on and deconstructed the structuralist idea of binary oppositions by noting that they are little hierarchies that are divided by power, through their positive/negative connotations, with the more powerful word being placed first. In addition, they are not actually complete opposites, as they overlap frequently, and the binary divide is therefore arbitrary. For example, he shows how the classic oppositions of presence/absence and inside/outside does not always have a clear distinction where one becomes the other, and how for structuralists there is no third alternative, making it impossible for something -- or someone -- to be both, or in between the two (Derrida, *Positions* 41-42).

Hélène Cixous adds to Derrida's interpretation of binary oppositions by arguing that in addition to being hierarchies, they are also inherently patriarchal. Her writing resists classification while it moves fluidly between fact and fiction, and argues that women need to free themselves through writing themselves. She uses, for instance, the binary opposition of father/mother. According to Cixous, the more powerful one in the binary system, the one to the left in this example, is also the one associated with the man, and man is associated with power in a patriarchal society. She also uses the examples of head/heart, logos/pathos, and activity/passivity and states in her text "Sorties: Out and Out: Attacks/Ways Out/Forays" that in philosophy, "woman is always associated with passivity" (Cixous 64), which leads to the idea that a woman needs to be passive to be allowed to exist at all. She continues to argue that Western philosophy is constructed in such a way that the woman must always be degraded, and that her subordination "gives the appearance of being the condition for the machinery's functioning" (65), meaning that the idea that women are lesser is ingrained in Western society, and that they are therefore always considered inherently inferior. It is interesting to note that Cixous, while on the subject of women's presumed passivity, alludes to fairy tales many times in her text, repeating the seminal "once upon a time..." to show the passivity of the woman that is frequent in such stories. This classic state of fairy tales is significant to this essay, as the novel subverts this expectation.

It is therefore also valuable to mention the way in which Derrida and Cixous write. Cixous, for instance, writes in a very poetical way, and as mentioned blurs the lines of fiction and fact by using impassioned rhetoric and a literariness that undermines the strict binary of

rational/emotional, “[m]ost women who have awakened remember having slept, *having been put to sleep*” (66), and shows in the process the importance of the ambivalence of literature. Derrida, while also being lyrical, also plays around with language. He has fun with oppositions and contrasts, like when he speaks of things that are neither/nor and in between, and writes that “spacing,” for instance, “is neither space nor time” (Derrida, *Positions* 43), yet forces the reader at the same time to take his words seriously as what he says is to clever to ignore.

In my analysis I will use Derrida’s and Cixous’ ideas to investigate how the novel not only shows the impossibility of finding an absolute and final meaning to both the story and identity itself, but how it also relies on the innate truth of this fluidity to tell the story. The tool of deconstruction is applied to explore the instability and ambiguity of the story, as well as what its subversiveness means for the presupposed binary oppositions in texts.

4. Analysis

As previously stated, this analysis focuses on the fluidity of identity by examining the characters, the emphasis being on their actions and emotions and the consequences thereof. I examine in depth scenes where the characters Sophie and Howl appear to unconsciously question the stability of their own selves and each other’s, and what that means in regard to deconstruction and the deferral of meaning. To do this justice, I also analyze several important aspects of the narrative such as the locations and the poem at the heart of it all in a quest to reveal the complexity of existence central to the characters’ behaviours. As mentioned in the introduction and touched upon in the previous research section by Mendlesohn, the novel’s metafictional state also permeates this analysis.

To analyze the ambiguity of the novel, a caveat is first needed regarding the third person omniscient narrator. The narrator purposefully never tells the reader the reason why the characters are feeling what they are feeling, which adds layers of interpretative possibilities to the story. For instance, on second or third read-throughs, the novel could easily read as much more romantic than it could appear at first, but the romantic aspects could just as easily be overlooked and disregarded. This arguably makes the romance subplot both foregrounded and pushed into the background simultaneously, depending on who the reader is. It also adds to the ambiguity of the personalities since it is left to the reader to interpret the various potential reasons for their emotions. Here the frequent use of the word “seems” throughout the novel becomes important, because it is often through the oblivious and limited

view of Sophie that things get interpreted, as it is only her subjective thoughts and no one else's that are present in the narration. "Seems" then, shows that nothing is certain in the novel, most things just appear to be. Most events turn out to have a different meaning when eventually shown from a different perspective or explained by the characters. The general nonfoundational structure, not only of the story, but of the ambiguity of the locations and characters makes nothing stable or final. This leads into the next section about the castle itself.

4.1 The Moving Castle

In the introduction to this essay, I quoted Jones on the unimportance of genres and their definitions and I argue that she uses the fluidity of the definitions of genre to not only refuse to decide to be one or the other -- in this case fantasy or science-fiction -- and that she by extension refuses to decide on an absolute story. Derrida writes in *the Law of Genre* that "a text cannot belong to no genre, it cannot be without or less a genre ... there is no genreless text; there is always a genre and genres, yet such participation never amounts to belonging" (65), that is, just as there is no outside-text, there is no text outside of genre, meaning that nothing exists in a vacuum, and that it can always be labeled in one way or another, yet those labels are inherently incomplete and insufficient. The thought that the novel does not belong and cannot be easily put into a specific category strengthens the idea of its innate nonfoundational nature, as the instability then becomes all encompassing. Even in broad terms, it is difficult to clearly define any sort of base or ground regarding the novel.

Therefore, to analyze the inherent instability omnipresent in the novel, it is necessary to point out that it is not just the identities of the characters themselves that are shaky, but also the setting of the story. The main scene of the action is, after all, a literal moving castle. The castle is not only almost in constant motion in Market Chipping, but is fueled by Calcifer, who is living only because he is anchored to Howl's heart, deep in the hearth. This means, as David Rudd touches upon in his article, that what keeps the castle going is Howl's actual heart. The fact then that Sophie gets the castle not only to stop, but Calcifer to let her in and stay in the castle, gets a deeper meaning. In a circumvented way, Howl opened his heart to Sophie the moment she stepped over the threshold.

Moreover, the castle not only moves but exists in four locations at once. Even more, three of these locations change position during the course of the story, heightening the shakiness of its core even further. While the locations change, one remains unmoved in relation to the castle -- Wales. And while the other three openings do change, they remain in Ingary. The nonfoundational foundation is very literal -- literary, even -- as there is no clear

base in the story, that is, there is no foundation to rely on, whether for belief of *what* is real, or *where* that real is placed. Additionally, since the castle only appears as a castle in Sophie's hometown of Market Chipping, and its interior is not compatible with its exterior -- that is, the interior is the interior of a small house, not the grandeur of a castle -- the castle itself is also an illusion, real yet not, existent yet a mirage of sorts. This question of realness segues clearly into the next section.

4.2 Ingary and Wales

To be able to analyze the novel and the locations therein even further, the concept of intertextuality needs to be addressed. Intertextuality is the notion that texts are interconnected to other texts. Coined by Julia Kristeva in her 1966 text "Word, Dialogue and Novel," she explained intertextuality as a replacement for intersubjectivity by claiming that "any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another" (Kristeva 37), defining intertextuality as what shows that the relationship between different texts is always present, in other words, no text is created in a vacuum. Jonathan Culler outlines this definition further in *The Pursuit of Signs*, where he states that intertextuality calls attention to the importance of prior texts and shows the misleading notion that a text is autonomous, and that "a work has the meaning it does only because certain things have previously been written" (Culler 114). He talks about intertextuality in terms of what a text presupposes, that is, what knowledge the writer must assume that the reader already has. Interestingly, like Cixous uses "once upon a time..." Culler also uses the language of fairy tales and fantasy to make this point. Fairy tales, by the very definition of the genre assumes that the reader is familiar with its tropes. This is of particular importance when discussing *HMC*, as the novel takes much inspiration from the stories of fairy tales without succumbing to be categorized as such. In other words, the novel would simply not *work* without its inherent intertextuality.

Therefore, when Jones introduces Wales halfway through the novel, she alters the rules and subverts the expectations of what readers assume about fantasy, relying on the built-in intertextuality to do so. In addition to this, she also questions what is real and what is not, and the meaning attributed to that word. When the castle door opens to the "real" world of Wales, it has the side effect of making Ingary a plausible possibility. I argue that in doing so, Jones upends the traditional hierarchical binary of real/imaginary and thus gives the "imaginary" place more power. Wales as seen through the eyes of Sophie is a very strange place indeed. As has been touched upon in the previous research section, the mundanity that

makes Ingary feel like a real place is nowhere to be found in this dimension, making Wales feel surreal and scary and not only stripping “reality” of its power, but giving that power to the “imaginary” in turn. By doing this, Jones upsets the foundation of what the meaning is supposed to be. All the fantasy tropes can now be -- and are -- put into question. In grounding a fantastic story in a science-fiction trope -- multiple dimensions -- coupled with Howl numerous literary references, makes it not only extremely intertextual, but also very self-referential. Howl is from the place where fairy tales were invented but is now living in one, literally. On the subject of Howl, the analysis moves onto the characters.

4.3 Sophie & Howl

Analyzing the characters shows the complexity of identity they possess, and further shows how Jones leans into that ambiguity by having the characters embrace that fluidity. The instability of the self is constantly present, for the story tells the reader that you can both be kind and cruel all at the same time. The ambiguity of identity is fully embraced, because while everyone in the story has a multitude of selves within them, none is shown to be lesser than any another.

As mentioned, Sophie is oblivious. What is more, Sophie might be kind, but she is not very nice. She frequently lies “quite unrepentant[ly]” (Jones 63). She does not know what she feels most of the time, just that she is angry. She grows grayer and grayer in the hat shop, and becomes, in fact, an old woman long before she is cursed. Sophie at the start of the story is actually in a position that many female fairy tale protagonists are at the end of theirs. Sophie is docile, with a home and a job she is good at. She is set to inherit her father’s business. She has, on a technicality, a purpose. While many protagonists start their stories as bored and adventure-seeking, they eventually learn through their hardships that peace and quiet is preferable. Where other characters grow to eventually long for the inevitable conflict to end -- for their happily ever afters -- Sophie craves conflict, and what sets her apart is that this craving does not cease by the end of the book, if anything, it grows increasingly larger throughout the novel. Sophie revels in the hardships and never has a moment of regret for leaving her old life behind. It is the lack of arguments and the paralyzing peace of her existence at the start of the story that causes her to fall into a depression. Sophie’s true nature is clearly hinted at when she insults a customer by saying her face is so ugly she could turn the King to stone, and has fun doing it,” [i]t troubled her to realize how very enjoyable it had been” (25). It is when Sophie starts acting against the trope of the female fairy tale character -- such as the docile Cinderella -- that not only the story truly starts, but the trouble. If Sophie

does what she wants to do, it means that her life will be complex and there will be no happy ending that is calm and quiet. She is unapologetically brash, refusing to feel guilty about the treatment of the customer, and unable not to be rude to the witch, despite her own fear in that moment, signaling that this personality quirk of hers is instinctive, and not caused by an outside source, thereby not being something that needs to or even can be fixed. The fact that it is when Sophie goes against the fairy tale orthodoxy that the story actually takes place again shows the extreme metafictionality of the novel as a whole. The story is dependent on this subversion while simultaneously acknowledging that the subversion is happening.

After she is cursed, and she starts pro-actively living and finds the strength to be more confident in what she wants out of life, the anger does not magically evaporate, but actually intensifies. For example, when Howl realizes the dog in their possession is really a cursed man, something Sophie has known all along, she is happy that Howl is angry because “[she] felt like a fight” (271-272). Later in the same scene, she also remarks that she ““feel[s] like killing something!”” (275), marking only one of many instances when Sophie either wants to, or actually does resort to violence. Sophie frequently thinks about how much she wants to slap people -- mostly Howl, though -- and even wishes to beat the King of Ingary with her walking stick at one point. The opposite of violence can be peace, which strengthens the idea of how wrong Sophie’s peaceful existence is for her at the beginning of the story. However, another supposed opposite can also conceivably be passivity, drawing direct parallels to how subversive Sophie is as a character. To contrast Sophie against what is, according to Cixous, associated with the woman to such a degree as to make the opposition violence itself and not just mere activity in general -- although, that too is certainly true for Sophie -- hints at a more severe overthrowing of the patriarchal standard in fairy tales.

Meanwhile, the characterization of Sophie becomes more complex as she is also excessively kind throughout the novel. She always helps those in need, whether it is Michael with a spell, a stranger knocking on the wizard’s door looking for help, or seemingly inanimate objects, like a scarecrow or a human skull. She frequently helps others while being furious at the same time, showing how one person can be several things at once. When Howl asks her not to hurt the spiders in the castle, she unbeknownst to herself but intuitively uses magic to get the spiders out of harm's way, despite not wanting to as she does not care for the spiders. As the story progresses, she treats Howl with increasing kindness, simultaneously as her irritation with him intensifies. For example, she instinctively tries to help him when he is sick, but he infuriates her at the same time. Despite this, she goes to great length not to wake him soon after. However, in her own obliviousness, she is unaware of her own burgeoning

feelings for him. Part of this is because she not only sees age as a freedom, but also uses it as a shield to express herself and have feelings unperturbed, while not actually confronting the underlying reasons for them.

An example of this is the way Sophie frequently reflects on the freedom and change of perspective and personality her forced old age has provided her, “As an old woman, she did not mind what she did or said. She found that a great relief” (64). The first time she meets Howl on May Day, she is terrified despite not knowing who he is, and refers to him as a much older man. In contrast, she sees him only as very young after she is cursed, and despite knowing he is the Horrible Wizard Howl, quickly stops finding him scary at all, despite knowing full well how powerful he is. The fact that Sophie also hides behind her old age visage and uses it as a shield becomes clear in her weed killer frenzy. When she finds out that everyone has known that she is cursed all along, and therefore were never safe from Howl, Sophie immediately deflects this possibility -- or truth rather -- and doubles down by claiming, “‘Besides,’ she added, ‘I am an old woman’” (280), not only making it true by repeating it, but trying to convince herself of its nontrue truth, as to avoid confronting her own feelings thus raising her metaphorical shield. Therefore, it is not hard to understand her when Howl reveals that it is Sophie herself that is keeping herself old, and that she could easily break the curse if she wanted to. Sophie fears what it would mean for her to be young again, as she never liked herself then, nor felt she had a purpose. This is evident throughout the novel, as Sophie is always making excuses for not leaving or working harder to get her curse to break -- she is simply having too much fun to consider going back to her old appearance -- that is, being young -- as she mostly has negative connotations to her own youth.

To bring it back to deconstruction and the impossibility of binary oppositions, as well as their presupposed patriarchal Cixousian definition, the kindness/cruelty parallel is obvious, and for Sophie, anger/joy are not antonyms, as she clearly enjoys being angry and enjoys taking that anger out on other people, as when she orders a man around and “[he] meekly did as she said. He was no fun at all to bully ... She snorted, and took her anger out on the weeds” (276-277). Sophie’s unapologetic trait is evident here, and right after this she seemingly attempts to murder Howl by throwing lethal weedkiller at his head, his crime being that he likes her for whoever she may be. Yet, even in her anger her immense kindness towards her sister is present in the very same scene when she realizes that her sister has tried to help her in her own way, as well as her consideration of the man she has just bullied, whom she not only saved -- him being the dog up until that point -- but realizes needs someone to talk to, to which she obliges.

Moreover, Sophie repeats the idea of being a failure because she is the eldest throughout the novel, blaming every misfortune on this belief. The fact that it is not the truth, or a fact at all, escapes her, while it is at the same time clearly shown to be false to the reader throughout the novel, as the story could not have unfolded if this belief was accurate. What makes this interesting is that this belief is not magically solved in the end, but is, humanely, still present. Even in the last chapter, Sophie repeats this belief, “‘I’m the eldest!’ Sophie shrieked. ‘I’m a failure!’ ‘Garbage!’ Howl shouted. ‘You just never stop to think!’” (319), showing the reader that the point is not to overcome a personal flaw with the goal to better oneself, but to embrace the idea of a contradictory existence. It is also interesting to note that previously in the novel when Sophie has been told something, the narrator points out that “she knew it was true.” Here, however, despite Howl clearly stating his opposite belief, no such statement is forthcoming. Hence, Sophie arguably does not stop believing she is a failure because she is the eldest, but starts accepting that she is a rash, hotheaded woman with flaws. In other words, believing in yourself is a constant work in progress. Therefore, while Mendlesohn claims Sophie rejects her presupposed storyline, I argue that she actually does not. Since Sophie believes her predestined role until the very end, she does not reject it, but adapts it and interprets it to fit her own wishes. She therefore goes from blaming all her predicaments on an outside source, to taking responsibility for how she acts. That is, instead learning her lesson and improving herself -- also known as the moral of the story -- Sophie changes very little, and I argue is even a worse person than when the story started, measured in the internal logic of the genre, at least. In fairy tales, the common trope and logical conclusion is often a neatly wrapped up peace-and-quiet type of ending -- the happily ever after. The female protagonist has overcome some obstacle -- like a wicked stepmother -- but has remained docile and pure throughout her terrible ordeal when she is at last saved by the man. In leaving the story without having Sophie apologize for her behaviour, or learning from her mistakes, the novel subverts this trope by refusing to pass judgement on her, essentially leaving things unfinished.

Howl, meanwhile, seems to revel in the ambiguity of his identity. He frequently reinvents himself, never being fully one or the other, constantly living in a sort-of in-between existence. In a Derridean sense, he continuously postpones the definition of his own self, inadvertently utilizing this state of non-definition to find comfort in his escape from his own “reality.” By making the character’s identity so undefined, Jones empowers the story in a succinct way. In addition, by literally positioning himself between worlds he gets to be several people at once, and while he has embraced this notion of multitudes to a certain extent, it has

cost him dearly. Being apart from his heart makes him both unsure and insecure in the middle of his embraced uncertainty. According to Sophie, Howl is nothing but a vain slitherer-outer. In fact, in the end, only the “nothing but” is altered in Sophie’s view of him. The vanity of Howl is obvious, as he spends two hours every single morning in the bathroom. In Wales, Howl is Howell Jenkins, his birth name being his least favourite alias; as he frequently states, he prefers Pendragon. While it is easy at first to blame this on his theatrical personality, that such an ordinary sounding name is not fit for a great wizard, the underlying implications are more complex. In rejecting his given name, Howl is rejecting his own non-magical world and all the supposed demands that it has on him. While he never explicitly says so, this includes his first name as well. It is only used by his family in Wales, and by Mrs. Pentstemmons, Howl’s old tutor and the first person he got to know in Ingary -- that is, before he reinvented himself. In Wales, Howl owns nothing but books and a car, and as it turns out, his sister has sold his books. The car is seemingly all that remains of Howl’s earthly possessions, quite literally, as Ingary is not located on earth. As Howl’s main character trait, according to Sophie, is his ability to avoid responsibility, the multiple meanings of only owning something the function of which is to get its passengers quickly from one place to another is ironic.

Additionally, the fact that Howl feels the need to escape a place where he could easily be successful and where he has people that love and care for him, to the extent that he has cut almost all material ties to it, points to a deeper set restlessness in him. This restlessness is evident all throughout the book. Howl is, after all, a man living in a constantly mobile Castle, yet he is always leaving it to go somewhere else, further adding to the idea of him as constantly searching. Much like his car, the castle is a vehicle, yet a vehicle fueled by Howl’s very existence.

Furthermore, Howl’s ambiguity is also clear in how he reacts to seemingly tiny setbacks. At first glance, Howl overreacting to his hair being discoloured to such an extent that he produces a copious amount of green slime and terrorizes an entire town with his anguished wails appear only to be an extension of Howl’s drama queen tendencies. However, as with every part of the novel, there are more layers to Howl’s emotions than simple vanity. Even Sophie, who is more often than not oblivious to the reasoning of those around her, knows that “tantrums are seldom about the thing they appear to be about” (93). Howl, and only Howl, values his appearance greatly but, it should be noted, only *his* appearance. He spends the majority of the novel unhappily in love with an apparent nonagenarian, after all. Although he suspects her to be the woman he met on May Day, he is not completely sure, only sure of the fact that she is in actuality young and loves her regardless of what she may

look like. For Howl, vanity in its feminine coded form means freedom, just as old age means freedom for Sophie. Spending so much time altering his appearance is something he arguably was not able to do in 1980s Wales as a rugby-playing scholar. Therefore, when Sophie messes with his beauty products, he feels as if his world has ended, his shield having been destroyed. In subverting the traditional masculinity of the male character, Jones frequently flips what the prescribed role is meant to convey by allowing a complexity in the character. Howl is neither hypermasculine nor hyperfeminine but something else entirely, while still inhabiting characteristics of both. Moreover, because Howl has at this stage already realized that he is in love with Sophie he views this as Sophie rejecting all that he believes himself to truly be. As Howl is a man parted from his heart, he believes that surface is all he has of value, and when that is corrupted, he slimes. This gets confirmed later, when Sophie asks him why he always stops showing interest in women as soon as he has made them love him and Howl seemingly evades answering her, explaining that the reason he loves spiders is because they keep trying to succeed, comparing himself to them and revealing himself at the same time, “‘I keep trying,’ he said with great sadness. ‘But I brought it on myself by making a bargain some years ago, and I know I shall never be able to love anyone properly now’” (215).

Howl is also exceedingly kind, if often covertly so. He implores Sophie to find a purpose, in his own circumvent way. When he asks Sophie to stop her incessant cleaning and she responds by saying that cleaning is what she is there to do, Howl simply answers, “‘Then you must think of a new meaning for your life’” (75), and later that she “‘must love servitude’” (76), implying that she does not have to earn her keep, but is welcome to stay in the castle either way. Howl never actually hires her as his new cleaning lady, nor does he agree that she is, but Sophie gives herself the job anyway. This has the dual effect of having Sophie gain her agency, while still not seeing her own value. He is patient where Sophie is angry, and only angry when the situation calls for it. When, for instance, he realizes that the dog is not a dog, but a cursed man, he becomes angry because it would have greatly simplified matters and solved a lot of problems if someone had informed him. His anger is not used as a defense mechanism against his feelings, he uses green slime for that instead. Despite his apparent aloofness, Howl respects and sees the worth of people more than any other character in the novel. He is patient with Michael when teaching him spells, and he covertly lets Sophie make all the final decisions regarding one of the locations when the castle moves, asking her where she would like to live -- “‘a nice house with lots of flowers’” (220) -- and what they should sell in their shop -- flowers -- obeying her wishes every time and going out of his way to make them true.

Most of Sophie's projections on Howl are subverted: he appears to avoid work, but turns out to always be working; he appears cruel and heartless, but is actually kinder than Sophie and has a bigger softer heart than any other characters, both literally in the castle, and figuratively, in his treatment and acceptance of people. Both Howl and Sophie are therefore highly emotional while being able to exhibit extreme rationality at the same time throughout the novel, thus showing the flaws and falseness of binary oppositions. Hence, when Webb argues that it is agency that is responsible for "individual identity," this presupposes both that identity is something stable and that that stability is somehow dependent on actions. I argue that this is an impossible state of existence in the novel's postmodern view on identity. When the novel thus leans into this unstable characterization, there is no sense of finality to the characters' personalities and this deferral of absolute meaning adds further nuance to the story, leading into the next section.

4.4 The Poem

While Mendlesohn writes that Howl learns to accept the storyability of his life, I believe this to be a simplification. When Mendlesohn uses the term storyability, she presupposes that Howl's arc follows a linear storyline, and by claiming that he accepts this fate, she erases a large fundamental part of his character and paints him as someone who gives in instead of someone who continuously fights back against predestined roles. While his life follows "Song" by John Donne, I question the storyability of the poem itself. The poem does not tell the reader anything and is therefore not "storyable." Poetry is by its very definition not fiction, and thus has arguably even less of a true or accurate story to tell. So then, on the theme of ambiguity and undecidability, Jones' choice of framing the story with a poem with as *poetic* language as "Song" leads only to further instability. While the interpretation of the poem is very literal in the novel, it is still an interpretation, and something being literal does not guarantee its storyability. Moreover, the literalness of its interpretation is often so vague that what was implied is understood after the fact. The prophecies of the poem's lines do not come true consecutively, or in a linear fashion, decreasing its inherent storyability even further.

For instance, Sophie accidentally plants a mandrake root when she is experimenting with flowers in the yard towards the end of the novel. Because of her innate magic abilities, the mandrake root blossoms into an ugly babyesque flower. However, "[g]et with child a mandrake root" (134) is only the second line in the first stanza, but the second to last prophecy to come true. The interpretation complication is also shown here when Howl is the only one to figure out what has occurred at first, "'I might have guessed,' he said. 'It's mandrake root.

Sophie strikes again. You do have a touch, don't you, Sophie?" (260), also strengthening the inherent power of words and thereby story, as well as insinuating Sophie's great power. The use of poetry to ground the story in some type of reality is then very paradoxical, as the poem itself speaks of impossible things. The poem is from a place where such things are impossible -- Wales -- but Ingary is a place where things "really exist." The metafictional base of the novel is evident as the poem then also becomes an intertextual self-referential device to partially poke fun at the tropes, but also show how fluid meaning can be. In the internal logic of the novel, the idea that a poem could be the basis of a curse is never ridiculed nor questioned, but actually given legitimacy by having Calcifer avidly admire and point out that weaving the curse together with the poem makes it stronger and more potent, thereby showing the power of literature.

4.5 The Ending

Although the story begins with poking fun of fairy tale tropes, the beginning is still in most aspects a typical beginning in the genre, yet as the novel is aware of this, the typicality is therefore put into question. The end, however, is not a typical ending. The ambiguity of the ending makes it not seem like an ending at all, but a continuing of the story. The ending, in a way, makes the novel appear to be a fast montage at the beginning of a film to establish enough story to get an adventure going. With the novel seemingly ending in medias res, it becomes an allegory for life as it is not finite, while creating a loop, warping the oppositions of begin/end and before/after. Endings rarely exist so cleanly in life, after all. When Howl says that they "ought to live happily ever after," the implication is not that they will, just that the possibility is available, as is any other possible choice. The words are also spoken by Howl, further subverting the innate passivity that traditionally would accompany this phrase as something only the narrator would claim as fact to tie up the story. The novel points this out further by having the "happily ever after" part not be the actual ending. The story really ends with a humorous remark from Calcifer who returns to the castle after being untied from the hearth -- and Howl's heart in the process, adding to the possibilities -- saying that part of the reason he returns is because "'it's raining out there in Market Chipping'" (329), showing that while some plot points have been tied up neatly, the overarching arc of the characters' is still very much ongoing. The ending is not only delayed but interrupted.

In the end, then, all was not well, but has the potential to be. Furthermore, the arbitrariness of binary oppositions is evident in the exchange when Sophie has reverted to her

young age and she now takes pride in her appearance, correcting Howl when he asks her if her hair is ginger:

‘Red gold,’ Sophie said. Not much had changed about Howl that she could see, now he had his heart back ... ‘Unlike some people’s,’ she said, ‘it’s natural.’

‘I’ve never seen why people put such value on things being natural,’ Howl said, and Sophie knew then that he was scarcely changed at all. (327)

Not only is this a dual lesson in self-love; it further shows how the main characters both accept each other as they are, and not only accept, but fully embrace it. Here, the binary opposition of natural/artificial gets dismantled as neither is seen as having more power than the other, and the question of what really is natural is posed, because part of what is natural for Howl is, in fact, his artifice. By not devaluing artifice, the novel further comments on the importance of art -- in this case literature -- by having Howl represent and speak for what is make-believe, that is, imaginary. Thus, the looseness of the ending, and by extension the entire novel, lets the reader know that sometimes the fun lies in not knowing.

5. Conclusion

The aim of this essay was to examine the ways in which Diana Wynne Jones subverts the fairy tale tropes present in canonically gendered fairy tales to show the ambiguity of identity in her novel *Howl's Moving Castle*. Investigating the story with the help of Derrida's ideas of deconstruction and the additional Cixousian theories on binary oppositions, I argue that the novel suggests and supports the idea of an inconclusive meaning. In embracing the complex, multifaceted and impossible nature of identity, Diana Wynne Jones creates not only a believable story, but tells her reader that the fun of life is not having answers or definite endings. By bypassing straightforwardness entirely, Jones uses the inherent metafictional state of the novel to deconstruct the archaic notion of the common fairy tale. In rejecting the supposed need to stick to one genre, Jones strengthens not only the story, but the idea of embracing uncertainty. If the reader is not sure what the rules of the story is, they simply have no other choice but to embrace it. When no one is necessarily as they appear or are assumed to be, the possibilities of the self are endless.

In the end, while the novel has an ending, the story technically does not, instead opting for embracing the ambiguity of the unknown fully and thereby strengthening the idea that an

absolute meaning can never be reached. By deconstructing the whereabouts of the characters, I argue that the story's essence is nonfoundational, as the locations are never stable and thus never final.

In letting the story stand on its own unstable yet unwavering legs, Jones shows that one does not need a stable idea of self or identity to have worth as a person, as long as a witch or a wizard has not divided said person into several parts, then that might admittedly complicate things a bit. Nonetheless, through the inherent intertextuality of the genre, Jones uses the literary tropes at her disposal to subvert the classic fairy tale in an ingenious way and playfully uses her story's instability to show the immense and immersive power that literature can have. Thus, I argue that she proposes the idea that there is no such thing as a final and finished growing person, and that the constant process of evolving is half the fun. In letting her characters embrace this ambiguity and go along with whoever they need to be in any given moment -- while blithely and exuberantly ignoring the potential immorality of the situation -- Jones both refuses to pass judgement on her characters and further demolishes the necessity of the archaic notion of the moral of the story, instead leaving the story unfinished, with room to grow, just like her characters.

In conclusion, by placing the ambiguity and undecidability of the self first by and thus giving it top priority, the heightened subjectivity of the novel shows that for the characters, there is no ultimate identity, and that the instability of that is perfectly all right.

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