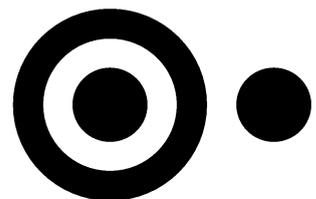


# Doing away with safety

**A study on mourning and metafiction in  
*How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional  
Universe***

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## Abstract

This essay works with Freud's theory of melancholia, and Hutcheon's theories of parody and metafictional writing to explore Charles Yu's novel *How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe*. By looking at how both theories handle the subject of identity and unconscious formations, this study argues that the relationship between the main character and his father visualizes the process of creating, as well as evolving a dialectic discourse regarding the function of literature. It also showcases the opportunity afforded by parody and self-aware writing, to create a narrative gap that allows for objective criticism that places the reader in an active role in the construction of the text.

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# 1. Introduction

This essay works with Charles Yu's novel *How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe* (in the essay referred to as *How to Live Safely*) to see how the main character's relationship to his father can be seen as representative of the shift in literary criticism afforded by metafictional narratives that Hutcheon proposes in her writing. The shift in Hutcheon concerns herself with is the establishment of metafiction as a viable way of writing with literary worth. This essay is more concerned with looking at how such a shift is made possible, rather than engaging in the same discussion as Hutcheon. This is mostly because metafiction, as Hutcheon herself puts it, is already institutionalized (Hutcheon 2) in literary discourse. In 2010, Charles Yu released *How to Live Safely* as his second novel. His previous work with short stories has been noticed by critics for its disposition to play with conventions and language. In *How to Live Safely*, Yu introduces us to a futuristic science-fiction adventure as we follow the main character who shares the author's name: Charles Yu (in the essay referred to as Charles so as not to be confused with the author Yu).

Charles is the son of a scientist who worked with building time machines before his disappearance. Working as a time machine repairman, Charles has made his time machine his home. As he returns to his timeline for maintenance, he comes face to face with a future version of himself that hands him a book. In a brief confrontation that ends with Charles shooting his future self, Charles gets caught in a time loop that will eventually result in him getting shot by his past self. Inside the time loop, Charles starts reading the book that he was given by his future self. The book turns out to be the story in which he is the protagonist: *How to Live Safely*. Following the orders from his future self, Charles starts re-writing the book at the same time as he reads it himself. Wanting to escape the fate that awaits him, Charles attempts to skip to the last page of the book, ending in him traveling to a place "between stories". As he escapes the place between stories, Charles makes his way back to his time machine. Once back in his time machine he sees his past play out in front of him as he is confronted with his memories of his parents and of losing his father. Before reaching the end of the time loop, Charles opens the box he received as he visited his mother before being

trapped in the time loop. In this box, he finds a gift he wished for when he was young. After finding a key in the book he is writing, Charles unlocks a secret compartment in the gift that holds a clue left for him by his father on where to find him. After this, Charles lands his time machine, ending the time loop. He survives the shot to the stomach and goes on to find his father and start a new life outside the time machine.

The focus of this essay mainly falls on the events that take place directly before, and during the time loop. Many of the overt codes of parodic writing can be seen during the events that occur inside the time loop. It is also here that Charles, as well as the readers, are introduced to Yu's overtly metafictional writing style. In this essay, the time loop that traps Charles is a key part of understanding his character development as he dares to break the rules that control his world. This emphasized importance in the time loop can also be found in Frances Tran's and Stephen Hock's writing. In both their readings of *How to Live Safely*, they see the time loop as a pivotal point in the book's narrative.

The main question this essay will attempt to answer is how the protagonist and his relationship to his father, can be seen as an example of evolution in literary criticism afforded by metafictional narratives. The essay will first analyze how Charles is stuck in a discourse created for him by his father. It will later move on to discuss how metafictional writing as represented in parody helps Charles see the discourse he is stuck in, and subsequently find his way outside it.

The study will use Linda Hutcheon's (1984) writing on narcissistic narratives as well as Freud's (1917) writing on melancholia. Through Freud, we can see how the loss of Charles's father has affected him, resulting in Charles trapping himself in a box that works as a constant reminder of the parent he lost. Freud's writing on re-identification and ego-loss guides the conversation as we analyze how Charles subconsciously<sup>1</sup> builds a wall around himself that shields him from having to interact with new ideas and narratives. This discussion is juxtaposed with Hutcheon's writing. With her theories, we can look at how parody is utilized to have the reader be directly confronted with the hidden conventions that

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<sup>1</sup> While the words subconscious is not a proper psychoanalytical term, it was chosen here to more accurately mimic Freud's writing, as he himself uses the word in the cited text.

create the sort of discourse Charles has trapped himself in. These two theories aid each other in looking at Charles's understanding of the world outside his time machine, and how it changes as he journeys through his own story. The way Hutcheon explains parody is as "the result of a conflict between realistic motivation and an aesthetic motivation which has become weak and has been made obvious" (Hutcheon 24). What this means for the arguments of this essay is that parody can be seen as an overtly metafictional style of writing. Parody explores differences and similarities and "invites a more literary reading [as a] recognition of literary codes" (25). Parody, the way this essay looks at it, finds its purpose by both establishing the conventions that they play with, as well as showcase how they have grown tired from overuse. Parody makes the form it tries to "dialectically attempt to surpass" (25) a part of itself to more clearly subvert reader expectations, just as Yu has done by branding his work as a sci-fi adventure

By working with both Freud and Hutcheon, this study argues that Charles' father represents an outdated discourse and Charles represents a passive reader within this discourse. The study also argues that the melancholia that Charles displays is a direct result of his inability to accept newer perspectives in his father's discourse, which Charles has come to identify himself with. The analysis will also look at how the interaction with his future self is the catalyst for Charles to undo his subjugation under a cemented discourse. Furthermore, by looking at the gift Charles receives from his mother, we get a clear representation of metafiction in practice. This moment will be expanded to see how it reflects the way parody and metafictional writing allows for an outside perspective on genre much the same way Hutcheon argues. The contents of the gift will be explained as the generic dressing that a reader can expect from science fiction, but more importantly, the box itself is explained as the rules that keep the contents in its place. With this perspective, the argument is made that Charles can see his life the same way he sees the gift. He is the content within, and his life inside the time machine in the box. Much the same way, the book Charles is writing about his life is the box for the content that is his life.

## 2. Previous Research

In attempting to formulate a concrete image regarding the current field of research on Yu's writing, it is clear that little work has been done to analyze his work academically. Many of the available texts are more concerned with discussing Yu's unique style of writing that plays with often surreal or fantastic situations to better approach the emotional core of the characters. Both Tran and Hock, as mentioned earlier, have both been important in creating the groundwork for this essay in terms of approaching through an academic context. Much of what has been written regarding Charles Yu and his novel *How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe* makes special mention of how he works when approaching complicated human emotions. As one can expect, the approaches and goals of the different texts varied, yet this affords us the possibility of getting a more well-rounded view of what makes Yu's work his own. The texts presented involve both literary reviews of the author and his work, as well as essays and articles that utilize *How to Live Safely* as a talking point to create the basis for their arguments. What I will be drawing from them is how they work with the genre of *How to Live Safely*, as well as how they approach and dissect the constant use of metafictional moments within the novel.

This way of "playing with language" as Hocks would call it, is an aspect of Yu's writing that Ander Monson discusses fondly in *The New York Times*. He presents the narrative woven by Yu as one with a very human story. The relationship between a father and a boy used to create the backdrop for an exploration of character and development that is presented through a text that is willing to go from dreary to humorous and finds its balance between too much and too little of anything by breaking its form. Monson writes that "The novel's central, lonely story is wrapped in glittering layers of gorgeous and playful meta-science-fiction. Its pages are populated with diagrams and annotations of possible time-loop permutations, [...] and pages intentionally left blank for effect. (Monson n.p.) This idea that the stories that Yu tells are centered in a very human situation is clear as well to Amy J. Elias, as she introduces the ethnic experience and how it is made apparent in *How*

to Live Safely, writing about Yu's ability to see and write about the small people that make the story of a more traditional hero possible.

In her article "How to Live Un Safely: Toward a Better Good Life for Asian American Studies," Frances Tran explores the subject of race and the ethnic identity of both the author as well as the main character in the story. Trans does so to engage with a geopolitical debate regarding Asian American studies as an academic field. With this, she calls to attention the real-world parallels that can be found in many of the world-building aspects throughout the story. Tran looks at the fictional universe Charles and his parents move to for work as a representative for the postcolonial movement of people from Asian countries over to the American shores searching after the "good life". Both Seo-young Chu (Tran 217) and Hock (Hock 59) both argue that science fiction is a genre that easily allows for authors to tackle real-world issues. With Trans arguments on the real-world parallels can be seen in Yu's writing, it would suggest that any reading of How to Live Safely would be in its right to read its characters and environments as representations of real-world situations.

Everything in the science-fictional universe Charles lives in works to keep the occupants just barely content, yet never fully satisfied. They are subjugated and kept in a perpetual state of low self-esteem. The conversation is then taken in an interesting direction as Tran looks at Charles's actions when faced with his future self as defiance against the idea of a model minority. In meeting his future self, Charles fails to follow the guidelines he himself lays out for the reader earlier in the book. The once very cautious man acts in defiance of any regulations that have been indoctrinated throughout his career with time-machines. Instead of running away "as any sensible person would know to do", he instead shoots his future self. Tran sees this act as a start to Charles challenging the way he has previously lived his life and as what will allow his characters emotional growth during the following time paradox (Tran 222). There is a need to live unsafely to be able to evolve a field that has been deemed stagnant to the point of obsolescence.

This same idea regarding how the time paradox Charles creates for himself, furthers his journey to accept that change will come only from a change in perspective, follows along in Tran's other work. In "Time Traveling with Care: On Female Coolies and Archival

Speculations”, Yu’s *How to Live Safely* is branded as speculative fiction, the same as by Elias. Tran engages once more with the concept of time travel as a means to deal with trauma, and specifically with the way that Yu treats time travel as something humane, more so than scientific. The way travel works do not allow for past events to change. At least not in the way we might want it to. Time travel in *How to Live Safely* is only so that we are given a chance to revisit and see that which once was, yet granting us nothing but a different perspective in the literal sense of being present as a third person. This different perspective is the key to Tran’s argument that literature is the way for us to time travel in reality. Those texts and stories allow us to hear, see and connect with what no longer is. And that the new perspective we are granted in our own “time-traveling” can and should be carried over when we look at the world around us today.

A sense of what today would be referred to as melancholia is prominent throughout *How to Live Safely*. In her interview with Charles Yu, Leslie Bow also brings up this point of melancholia as very prevalent in Yu’s work by mentioning how the “protagonists use humor as an inept means of disguising pervasive melancholy” (Bow n.p.). Bow deviates from Tran’s school of thinking. According to her, Yu’s work is not something that can be seen as speculative science fiction. In her writing, she is more inclined to call it Magical Realism. The way Yu works with the mundane is by hiding away deep, intricate and often difficult emotions behind a thin veil of “metaphoric” usage of math and language (Monson n.p.). For her, to understand Yu’s writing, it is vital to look at how something such as the emotional distance is rendered almost textually tangible. Charles’s connection to his father is not left only spoken. Rather, Yu actively uses similes and metaphors such as Charles’s father being in a different time and space to instill a sort of tangible emotional distance. Yu is a master at externalizing the arbitrary or inane simulacra that govern contemporary bourgeois existence (Bow n.p.) Bow looks at how the characters are all working along with pre-made rules for how they are supposed to. Rules created in other spaces, and points at Yu’s willingness to look at all types of texts such as sitcoms, video-games, and math problems and how he imposes these constraints to “structure the lives of his characters” (Bow n.p.). This willingness to play with the rules of a genre and even the concept of what it means to belong to a genre is something that will be returned to in this essay, as it creates the path forward for a poststructuralist inspection of Yu’s work.

In his reading of the work, Stephen Hock focuses on how *How to Live Safely* places itself in a postmodern context. He brings to attention the permeating theme of boxes and the ironic detachment towards these placing Yu in a conversation regarding postmodern style. Hock heralds Yu as one of the writers keeping postmodernism as a relevant approach to literature, as *How to Live Safely* was published at the end of the decade Hock himself quotes as “the end of the reign of postmodernist irony” (Hock 59). Much the same as Tran, Hock emphasizes a lot of importance in the time loop Charles gets trapped in. Yet while Hock does not attempt to erase any semblance of the political context in Yu’s work, the focus of his writing is less on furthering any geopolitical debate, and more so on the style and genre of Yu’s novel. Hock does not engage with the discussion regarding Charles’s character in an ethical context and focuses more on Charles as an individual. Nevertheless, there are still a lot of similar throughlines that grants us a clearer image regarding the field of how to best understand Yu’s work from an academic point of view. As mentioned above, much the same as Tran; Hock’s argument is granted validity by focusing largely on the time loop that traps Charles after he shoots his future self. Hock looks at this moment of acting against the expected procedure and the time loop that follows as the spark that allows for Charles's transformation, not in any physical manner, but rather as a cognitive transformation. It is by acting against the institutionalized code of conduct that Charles can look at the boxes he lives in as something that traps him rather than protects him.

Another aspect that captures Hock’s focus is that of the protagonist becoming the author. As Charles is trapped in the time loop and writes the text, in an act Hock calls “nakedly metafiction[...]”, that will become the genesis for the text that we are reading (down to the very name, *How to Live Safely* in a Science Fictional Universe). This so-called, naked metafiction and Charles repositioning from actor to author is something vital for the way this essay hopes to understand Yu’s work. However, the most important aspect of Hock’s text that will be relevant moving forward with this essay is that the many stylistic choices implemented by Yu can be directly linked to a postmodern sensibility regarding writing and literature. My analysis will build on both Hock’s and Tran’s arguments by looking at the choices made by both Charles and Yu through the story and how this creates a space for

human development as a postmodern reader, whilst attempting to look at the genre and postmodern aspects along with metafiction and mourning.

### 3. Theoretical Framework

In the following section, two theories will be introduced and the most essential parts that play a role in the analysis will be presented. The two theories explained are Linda Hutcheon's theory of metafiction and her work with parody to develop a more inclusive dialog about literature. The other is Sigmund Freud's theory of melancholia and how it is identified.

In Narcissistic Narrative: The metafictional paradox, Linda Hutcheon lays out her ideas of parodic writing and the effect they were having on literary criticism during the time of her writing (4). What Hutcheon proposes is the notion that parody plays with established conventions not as a means of belittling, but rather as a way of exploring these conventions. She mentions that "It is wrong to see the end of this process as mockery, ridicule or mere destruction. Metafictional parodies and imitates as a way to a new form which is just as serious and valid" (25). With this Hutcheon aims at establishing parody as necessary in literary criticism as a way to expand the way we understand and examine narratives.

With "narcissistic narrative", Hutcheon refers to the self-reflective writing that is prominent within the metafictional styles of writing such as parodies. Whether overtly or covertly drawing attention to its self-awareness, a narcissistic narrative exposes itself as a linguistic artifact with intent to "unmask dead conventions by challenging [and] mirroring" (18).

What Hutcheon explores in her writing is the possibility for parody and metafiction to expand the discussion and understanding of language and narrative by making not just the mimesis of product, but also the mimesis of process visible to the reader. Hutcheon presents the novel as an inherently mimetic genre (39); the novel intends to recreate reality via textual means. By utilizing textual representation, the author is tasked with transferring their

understanding of the world to the reader, to cipher it for the reader to decipher; in so doing, they create a “heterocosm” (Hutcheon 39), a world within the narrative, out of ideas that universally translate into the general understanding of “truth” or realism. This is aided by utilizing established ideas and conventions that will be more easily recognizable for the reader since “In order to comprehend the language of fiction, the reader must share with the writer certain recognizable codes” (29). Hutcheon does not attempt to pinpoint what this truth may entail. In fact, she dedicates a major part of her writing to establish that the very nature of writing as a process of copying disallows the very idea of one singular truth to exist within the writing. Instead, she points to the fact that this rigid idea of text as an instrument for recreating truth is what has cemented critical approaches towards understanding literature in an old mindset. In her writing, Hutcheon takes a firm stand that attempting to approach all literary work, both contemporary and old, by using the same criticism only function to halt the progress of evolving the way we interact with literary narratives.

When talking about self-reflective meta-writing, Hutcheon presents two concepts, one being mimesis of product and the other mimesis of process. Mimesis of product is inherent to writing. It aims to recreate conventions and established codes unique to each genre. However, Hutcheon expands on this by calling attention to the fact that even in the Aristotelian tradition, mimetics could very well include things lacking empirical counterparts such as concepts, conventions, earlier established styles and ideas that are generally understood to belong within any given writing tradition (40). The other concept, mimesis of process, is also something that has been long established in the tradition of narrative, yet it is most commonly hidden and not brought to the attention of the reader (41). The process focuses less so on the ideas of what we know regarding literary traditions, and more so on how they are created and set within the cultural heritage. Mimesis of process is what is outside of the narrative diegetic space of the story. It is the writing process that creates the heterocosm that constitutes the world inside the books.

Having the texts themselves be self-reflective and implementing the act of writing in itself is common within metafictional writing. Yet still, Hutcheon mentions how works that incorporate such choices are often seen as lesser and needed to be kept in a different domain than that of literary criticism (20). It is here we can make space for Hutcheon’s arguments

regarding parodic writing and the possibilities it creates for readers to gain new agency during the reading.

Through parody, the choices left invisible by other authors are given a tangibility as they are put under observation and made a central narrative tool. What the readers thought they knew about the narrative is called into question as established rules are turned on themselves and thus rendered possible to dissect and explore via new angles. This creates friction between the text and the reader, granting an opportunity to criticize the work in new ways. It is this friction that makes up the foundation of what Hutcheon postulates would create a broader perspective for understanding and engaging with texts, as previous critical approaches no longer work to cover all of what novels that do not fit into the 19th-century style of realism have to offer. This does not just include contemporary work. Hutcheon argues that parodic writing played part in the birth of the novel, referring to how Cervantes, in *Don Quixote*, plays with the conventions of the 17th-century writing. (Hutcheon 38)

It is also this friction that enables what Hutcheon writes about as a new code for the reader (25). As conventions are challenged, so is the reader, and she goes on to explain that parody and metafictional writing do away with the passive position of the reader (39). Instead, “The reader must accept responsibility for the act of decoding” (39). The reader is asked to be active in how they perceive, and interpose themselves on to, the text. The reader is now rendered responsible for engaging with the ideas of the text. Self-reflective parodies carry the ability to defamiliarize the text to the reader and thus force a new conversation between the two. The texts that create a narrative about its genesis separates itself from the literary history enough to be self-referential. As Hutcheon writes, “[...] narcissistic fiction can only be judged in terms of its internal validity” (19), and it is then the reader that works to order the events and find its place in a literary tradition by assuming the role of the critic as well as both reader and writer. It must again be stated that parody is not an attempt to end the narrative code from where it takes its structure. Yet rather, it works to legitimize it. We must understand that parody the way Hutcheon describes it, places the conventions they play with as a backdrop for their story. By doing this, parody legitimizes these conventions by observing their place within narrative tradition before being able to challenge them. This

notion of confirming the invisible rules before being able to move past them is vital for the analysis section of this essay.

Sigmund Freud's ideas of psychoanalysis have not only been a cornerstone for exploring the human psyche but it has also hugely influential in the evolution of literary theory. In his text *Mourning and Melancholia*, Freud attempts to define what could cause melancholia, as well as defining a difference between melancholia and mourning. Freud writes that mourning and melancholia are, on many levels, very similar conditions (243). Both would appear to be reactions to the loss of, what Freud refers to as, a "love-object". Both are seen as a symptom of the subject's attempt to move on from this loss, or the inability to do just so. Freud sees mourning as natural and generally unharmed (244). As the love-object, for instance, a loved one or similar is removed, the subject attempts to come to terms with this by re-establishing themselves within a new truth via "reality-testing" (244). In a healthy response to this reality-testing, the emotions are attached to a new love-object and a so-called libidinal cathexis occurs (249). After this, the subject can eventually move on and live a healthy life. (245) Melancholia comes in to play when this healthy response is not achieved. The subject fails its attempts to come to grips with the reality that the love-object no longer exists.

The loss that causes melancholia does not have to be death. Freud notes that even loss of another kind, such as being left by a loved one, can be enough. What seems to occur is that the subjects can not "consciously perceive what [they have] lost" (245). So even when the subject knows whom they have lost, they are unable to see what has been lost in them. Freud writes that this can eventually lead to hallucinatory effects of the mind fooling itself into believing the love-object is not really gone (244). Yet for this essay, more important is when this inability to accept reality goes on to attack the subject's ego.

The subjects' feelings regarding the love-object are ambivalent as it can function to "import imposed feelings of love and hate into the relationship" (Freud 251). The ambivalence is only amplified during the time of establishing a reality spurred by the loss of the love-object and creates a "cleavage" within the subject's ego. This rift is what Freud claims allows the subjects critical agency (what Freud moves on to classify as "conscience") (247) to split from the ego to turn on itself in a "narcissistic type of object love" (250).

Instead of finding a new love object, it attaches the libidinal connections, previously meant for the love-object, to the ego of the subject itself. All the emotions and opinions regarding the love-object are thus given an escape as the subject allows itself to freely admit its anger, yet utilizes themselves and their ego as the target for it (248). The critical part of the ego is given an outside perspective of the subject and uses it to “[...] establish an identification of the ego with the abandoned object” (249).

With this, Freud has established the distinction between mourning and melancholia that will be most important for this essay. Whereas mourning is a response to loss, melancholia is more pathological. In melancholia, the subject unknowingly (245) carries with them the loss and their feeling regarding the love-object. When the subject’s ego identifies itself with the lost love-object, the object-loss instead becomes ego-loss. With this, what Freud would determine a healthy response to loss, is no longer achievable. The subject’s own identity is subjugated in favor of the newly adapted characteristics of the love-object.

Using both Hutcheon’s and Freud’s theories, we can gain a clearer insight into the processes that go into creating the rigid discourse that Hutcheon criticizes, as well as how the same idea can be seen in Charles and the effects of his melancholia. Much like psychoanalysis, parody is interested in unveiling and bringing forth the hidden reasons for our reflection of reality. Parody wants to challenge the reader to make them conscious of the conventions that are in play to create any given narrative discourse. This same idea can be found in Freud’s interest in literature. Hutcheon refers to Freud’s ideas on writing, saying, “Freud believed that the writer aimed at awakening in the reader the same emotions and ‘mental constellation’ that produced in him the impetus to create” (Hutcheon 145). This idea of “awakening the same emotions” holds true when looking at mimetics. As mentioned, mimetics are central in parody for establishing the ideas that parodic writing aims to subvert.

Both theories may seem separate in how they work with literature, but what they bring to this essay to better understand Yu’s novel is in understanding Charles’s world as a manifestation of his relationship with his father. How he projects himself on his surrounding is in part due to melancholia from losing his father, and part in the literary discourse his father represents. As Freud argues for the idea that subjects suffering from melancholia have

failed when attempting to identify themselves in a reality where their love-object no longer exists. Hutcheon, on the other hand, argues that parodic writing works to legitimize the conventions of genre by offering perspective on the walls that create them. Both theories are needed when exploring the protagonist Charles since they both help establish the start and endpoint of Charles' character development through the story. Both also become foundational in seeing Charles and his father as linguistic developments within a set discourse.

## 4. Analysis

When talking about Duchamp's art-installation *The Large Glass*, Robert Hughes described it as "[...] a glimpse into Hell; a peculiarly modernist Hell of repetition and loneliness." (Hughes n.p.) In the art piece, Duchamp has hidden symbols of machinery within itself that tells a story of longing and distance. Hughes connects this story to the writing on dream interpretation by Freud, making a point of human constructions as recreations of human needs and emotions. The designs found in *The Large Glass* are abstractions, visible when looking away from the more obvious patterns and shapes and when knowing what to look for. The art installation itself is noteworthy in the fact that it is made out of a window that has been reworked into art. The cracks and marks on it rob it of what one might think is the primary function of a window. It no longer allows the observer to look through it unhindered. It no longer allows for the onlooker to have the window be a safety, a barrier that lets them see the world behind it without being forced to exist within it. Instead, the cracks and markings draw the eyes towards it rather than through it. The background becomes susceptible to change only by moving the glass, but never is it allowed to take precedent over Duchamp's designs. This one piece of art showcases the way that taking what usually is seen as counter to the purpose of an item, and would be seen as necessary to hide, and instead challenges the ones that interact with it to question the limits of the item.

In Hutcheon's theories of parody, she notes that a common way in which writers might challenge the reader's perception of a text is by incorporating the act of writing in its narrative. By doing this, the text performs the same act as Duchamp's work by drawing attention to the text and the conventions of texts like it. The importance of parody for this essay is the way it allows for play with rules of established conventions. Parody has the ability to subvert reader expectations. It can create friction between what the readers know about novels and what novels can be by drawing attention to the medium itself rather than just the story it tells. The friction created by parodic writing is hopefully enough to give pause, and in that moment of detachment a new dialog can be born, that lifts the conversation about the novel as a genre to invite new ideas and perspectives.

In *Narcissistic Narrative*, Hutcheon uses her theories of narcissistic narratives to look at the recurring structural models found in four different kinds of metafiction (31): fantasy, detective stories, games structure, and erotica. In this analysis, I will attempt to use her theories as presented in the previous section to approach a fifth genre: science fiction. Freud's writing on melancholia, as well as Hutcheon's theory of parody and metafiction, will be used to explore Charles as a representation of a reader in a literary discourse that is cemented and unwilling to accept new perspectives. Further, the analysis will attempt to explore the ways Yu's novel visualizes how metafiction can free the reader from said discourse.

#### 4.1 Charles and Melancholia

In this section, Freud's theory of melancholia as an inability to move on from loss will be used to explore the main character Charles, as well as see how he can be read as representative for a reader in a discourse of literary criticism created by previous generations. This will later be connected with Hutcheon's arguments regarding the same set discourse that she writes as understanding literature from a perspective of realism as the best way to question the validity of literature (Hutcheon 25). Furthermore, Freud's ideas on object-cathexis will aid in reading Charles's death as becoming a substitute for the loss of his father, marking both the beginning and his coming to terms with reality without his father and moving on. It is important to reiterate that Freud never mentions a cure to melancholia in his

writing. To postulate narratives as curative is beyond the scope of this essay. Freud's theories are here to allow us to see how Charles, in the position of the reader, is unable to move forward from the past ideas of literature that his father represents.

In Yu's story, Charles takes on both the role of the main protagonist as well as the narrator. By having Charles as both protagonist and narrator, the story is told from a first-person perspective with an objective narrator. All the events played out in the story get told to the reader the way Charles experiences them. Character, places and even memories are filtered through Charles's perspective as they are introduced to the reader. Exceptions to this first-person storytelling are only found in small blurbs retelling rules for how Charles' home, the "minor universe 31" (MU31), works. Yet even these exceptions are called into question as Charles is revealed to be the author of *How to Live Safely* as well. More on that in later passages. In one of the blurbs retelling the rules of how MU31 works, the reader is told that the universe was left unfinished. This has affected the "[...] human inhabitants, who seem to have been left with a lingering sense of incompleteness" (Yu 11). And in yet another, it is shown that working as a time machine repairman is "back office" work (Yu 31), rather than a hero's work. With this knowledge, we are aware both of the facts that Charles' day is permeated with a sense of unfulfillment, as well as the fact that he does not consider himself the main character even in his own story. There is a split between the ego and self-criticism (Freud 246) much the same as Freud reports in his subjects. This renders Charles unable to not place himself in the position of "lesser than" and not good enough for those around him. Yet it also makes the readers aware of a contrasting "more than"; there is something more for Charles to aspire to, yet that he is unable to see due to the rules that govern the reality of MU31. As a reader, he has yet to learn how to ask questions that "traditional realism" often attempts to conceal (Hutcheon 41).

Readers are given clues as to what has caused Charles' self-hatred even before living in MU31 via the chronological jumps between chapters from Charles' present to his past. The chapters of Charles' past fill in the story of Charles' relationship with his father. They tell the story of when Charles and his father worked together to create a time machine, an early proto version of the box Charles now uses to spend his nights sleeping in a "nameless dateless day" (15). In these chapters, we see a time before Charles' father disappeared. Back when Charles

was young and all he knew about the world was what he could learn from his parents. Charles' understanding of science could never be larger than the garage his father worked in. Charles also learned the language from his parents, even though they were not native speakers (82) And with this, we see that Charles parents were conformed to fit the language of the narrative just the same way they in turn help him

When reading Yu's work, a sense of melancholia becomes apparent. Charles carries with him many elements that echo those Freud credited to the kind of pathological mourning that leads to melancholia. As noted above, Freud claims melancholia might occur when the subject has lost something. When attempting to re-create themselves in this new reality without that "something", the subject finds itself s unable to. The new reality where the love-object is gone is never quite cemented in the subject's consciousness. Failing to find new anchor points to which to attach its feelings, the feelings instead attach to the ego. Charles has lost his father but has not done so in any ordinary way. His father is lost in time after failing at his dreams. All of Charles's memories of his father and their time together are retold from the perspective of the Charles that was there when it all happened. Back when Charles was a young boy who worked with his father, and who lost him without ever truly understanding why. The inability to move on after losing his father is symbolized in Charles's lifestyle. He continues to work as a repairman of time machines. Not only does this remind him of the work he did alongside his father in the past, but it also allows Charles to live his life inside his time machine. Everything around him is as if created to not allow him to forget the loss that he has suffered. Charles, as the reader, is confronted with the fact that the conventions of the narratives he grew up with are changing. Just like his father, the texts that laid the foundation for his understanding of novels are being lost in time. Like with the loss of the father, Charles is unable to find his new anchor points in this newer narrative discourse.

Freud points to the fact that melancholia can appear as a response to more than just the death of the love-object. He mentions that it might also be a response to the disappearance of what the subject thinks they should love, or an idea that becomes unavailable (Freud 245). Charles, in the role of the narrator, explains that his father is lost in time, starting with only a few seconds and increasing to five minutes (Yu 192), then finally lost entirely. This can

arguably be read as the father being lost via suicide, but in the diegesis of the story, the loss of the father is a slow process. As Freud notes, the one suffering from melancholia may be aware of whom they have lost, but not what in themselves is lost. Charles is highly aware of having lost his father, but he is blind to what his father meant for him. Seeing Charles as a reader of his own narrative, he is reflecting only on the events that unfold, yet unable to see the implications these events have on the process of telling the story.

The moment Charles meets his future self is a catalyst for the events that will eventually have Charles stuck in a time loop. Instead of following the set procedure and running away when meeting his future self, Charles shoots him. Reiterating Tran's ideas of this as an important moment in Charles's process of changing his life, breaking the rules in this way can be seen as Charles's first steps toward doing away with his self-subjugation. (Tran 222) Breaking the rules allow him to change the views on literature he was taught and unable to break free from. While this essay is less interested in looking at how breaking rules written by others relates to the struggles of minorities, it is still of interest to dissect this interaction to understand how it begins the process of cathexis release for Charles both as a protagonist, and as a reader.

As he suffers from a melancholic state, Charles has allowed his ego to take on the identity of his father. Subconsciously<sup>2</sup>, he carries his father with him as evident by the life he has built for himself, closing himself in a world and space afforded to him by his father's work to avoid the "narrational gravity" (Yu 217). Yet what happens in the time loop is that he is allowed an outside perspective of not only his own history but also his father's. For the first time, Charles is granted a view of his past not shaped by his own biases. By being forced into re-examining the past, and contrasting what he sees with what he thinks he knows of his past, Charles can start to challenge the way he thinks about his father, as well as himself.

Through the experiences inside the time loop, Charles now becomes conscious of the machinations that have caused his emotional state. And with Charles as a reader, the self-reflective narrative has allowed friction that allows for new perspectives of past narratives to take place. However, the trauma brought upon Charles by his father's

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<sup>2</sup> Once again this word choice is made to better reflect Freud's writing

disappearance is still there. As time travel in Yu's writing does not allow Charles to change the past, what has happened still is.

This is where the reader is brought back to the events that instigated the time loop. Charles has made the choice of purposefully returning to the suffering he knows awaits him. With his newfound awareness of his story and agency (Yu 217), the suffering is now made conscious. The self-aware nature of parody has "induced the reader [here both Charles and the physical reader] to more self-conscious participation in the text, causing [them] to reflect on the various operations he is asked to carry out. (Hutcheon 148). As such, by shooting himself, and in so doing killing of his own future, Charles reflects on all the conventions that have created his situation.

When stepping out of the time machine again, Charles is once again confronted with himself. Yet this time, he is the one that gets shot. While he does not die from the shot to the stomach, the Charles that enters the time loop does not know this. In his world, the shot has killed the other future Charles, and will, therefore, be the shot that kills himself (Yu 218). When he finally comes to terms with his death, Charles is finally successful where he previously was not. He comes to terms with a reality in which the love-object (now himself) is lost and gone, the process of object-cathexis is successful. And so is his transformation from a passive reader, stuck in a past discourse, to an active reader. As will be discussed in the next passage, Charles has also taken on the position as the author of his own narrative.

## 4.2 Parody and boxes

When creating any literary work for an intended genre, there are often certain ideas from previous works that influence the writing process. Earlier narratives that have inspired the author can leave traces of themselves in any story they beget. This concept is what Hutcheon refers to as mimesis of product. In this passage, we will see how Hutcheon's theories on parody and metafiction can aid in understanding Charles's process of stepping out of the conventions his previously discussed self-awareness aided him in confronting.

Stephen Hock tells us that the detached irony that makes up a central part of postmodernist writing disappeared with the terrorist attack of 9/11. This event created a sense of dread and a western discourse that would not allow for playing around with the idea of meaning. To cope with the madness that permeated the post 9/11 life of Americans, and by extension the western world, one could easily understand there was the need for a purpose. There needed to be a purpose that could work as a unifier and something that had a clear answer free from moral gray zones. This answer also needed to be free from real-life surroundings to function as a backdrop for a “dialectical development” (Hutcheon 38) that was interested in finding a true way to understand literature. As parodies often carry with them a negative connotation (Hutcheon 20) (something clearly stated as not true in Hutcheon’s idea of parody) it is understandable how such writing was undesirable during the post 9/11 diplomatic turmoil. *How to Live Safely* was published at the end of the decade that started with this symbolic “death” of postmodernism, something that Hock makes note of in his reading of the work.

In his novel, Yu works with science fiction, a genre rife with the possibility of incorporating the postmodern approach to storytelling. As mentioned before, Hutcheon applies her theories, as presented in *Narcissistic Narrative*, to fantasy, game structure, detective stories, and erotica. Yet she leaves an opening for the same theories to be used in approaching other genres (Hutcheon 33). In science fiction, the author can often build the story's narrative diegetic by building on the reader’s already established understanding of the real world. Since science fiction often aims to explore a possible world created by potential real-world science, the author would not have to re-invent the rules by which the world in their story works. By placing the story in a familiar real world-setting, yet still different enough not to be considered realism, the author creates a narrative gap where the reader can feel alien within a space of something familiar and grounded in reality. This gap perfectly houses the same sort of re-examining of the known form of genre that Hutcheon proposes to be the benefit of parodic writing.

Returning to Hock, he focuses a great deal on the recurrence of boxes within Charles’s inner narrative. His life as a repairman mostly takes place within the box that constitutes his time machine, he calls the garage where his father works “a box of cold air”

(Yu 21) and even mentions that worry is his mother's "[...] box to live inside of, worry as a mechanism for evading the present" (Yu 83). The idea of boxes as genre is best seen as Charles opens a gift given to him by his mother right before he meets his future self. In this box, he finds a set of "Chrono -adventure survival" items that he wished for many years ago as a kid. Charles remarks on how cheap it all looks, yet how cool he would have found it in younger days as he was more naive (Yu 203) before he had the first-hand experience of what time travel entails, and how these cheap toys do not have any connection with the real-life type of adventure they attempt to be a part of. He even notes how a few of the pieces are just "filler." That the items are just mundane objects with a fancy coat of paint, so that they may pass as being sci-fi worthy, futuristic enough that they can be accepted as belonging with the rest of the items. Hutcheon argues that a genre that does not leave room for its own parody is destined to stagnate, and in much the same way these objects are nothing more than a hollow attempt at continuing the style they aim to copy (Hutcheon 24). Similar to how these cheap items merely settle on mimetics of the product that is sci-fi and makes no attempts at furthering the tradition it belongs to. The container the items come in is described as a box, and within that box are individual boxes to house the separate items. The box is explained as creating a rigid structure that keeps the items together as a complete package, yet still to keep them distinct.

Before going on to talk about the many boxes and their place in the story, we need to understand what purpose they serve for this essay. Hock makes the connection between the boxes and the concept of genre. With this, we can look at how boxes are implemented into the story and see how they fit into Hutcheon's arguments of challenging genre through metafictional writing. The boxes also represent safety that is afforded those willing to work within the predetermined borders created through culturally inherited ideas within the field of literature and storytelling. The boxes we see in Yu's work are often introduced as something to keep the person inside safe. Or as Hutcheon describes it when referring to readers of "traditional realism": passive (Hutcheon 39). Charles mentions how dangerous and uncertain it would be to ever leave his box during his travels through time (Yu 152). In the same way, the memory loop that Charles has paid to keep his mother in is there to keep her content and away from the harm that comes from being part of reality and the memories that fill it. Charles stays inside his box that is set to travel in a way that never actually moves forward in

time. This is his way of never having to face the hardships that stem from allowing his narrative to advance. It is with these boxes that we find the importance of the word *Safely* in the title of the story, as well as what is gained in approaching them with Hutcheon's ideas of parody. Parody does not allow for readers to stay passive within a box but instead forces the perspective towards the conventions that create it (Hutcheon 31).

Tran homes in further on the titular word *safely* by looking at the boxes as something that doesn't just keep the main character safe, but also complacent, and therefore subjugated. Without diving into the geopolitical debate of immigration and model minority that Tran discusses, our reading is still able to build on her ideas. Those that choose to live inside their box only exchange the uncertainty of the unknown, with the suffering of the expected. Neither Charles, his mother nor his father is ever made truly happy by staying in their boxes, and Charles also mentions that most people rent time machines (described in the story as boxes) only to revisit "the unhappiest day of their lives" (Yu 46). The "safety" of the boxes is only that those inside are granted an illusion of control over their narrative by choosing their own suffering. The characters are never forced to encounter the friction that comes with re-examination and scrutiny of TM31 as long as they stay inside the boxes. Only by exiting the boxes, and thus acting "unsafely" can they gain an outside perspective on the world they live in, just as readers gain perspective on the conventions that helped in creating the narrative. Parody is set to do the same thing. Instead of drawing attention to the content of the boxes, parody draws attention towards the boxes themselves the same way Duchamp draws attention towards the glass. Charles, as well as the reader, can now see the limits of the sci-fi conventions. This allows them to begin seeing how sci-fi can be used to address literary questions that could have previously been seen as outside of its narrative scope.

As mentioned, the boxes in the novel can be understood as placeholders for ideas. For example, in Hock's case, the boxes represent genre. When Charles faces off with his future self, future Charles tells him "the book is the key" (Yu 89). This turns out to be a heavy fisted clue that inside the book is a key to a secret compartment in the Chrono-adventure-kit-box. However, "the book is the key" also functions as an equally heavy fisted clue to how we can work with the book as the key to unlock new perspectives of boxes and genre. We are granted a space to look at the conventions that we have come to expect from a typical science fiction

narrative such as robots, time travel, and AI-companions., yet also more abstract ideas like human ingenuity and boundless lust for exploration.

Charles is given the “chrono-adventure”-box from his parents. This can be read as the passing on of cultural ideas that we inherit from older generations. In the diegetic narrative of the story, however, the conventions of sci-fi take the form of toys, playthings that are safe to approach for a kid so that they can get familiarised with them, yet it is also commodified to the point that its cheap material that still forces Charles’ father to spend what little money he has to offer his son a chance to even take part of the box’s content. With this, Yu presents genre as something that is created to be accessible only with the capital to do so, be it monetary or cultural. The line of literary discourse Hutcheon opposes argues that “the novel began to lose those attractive features [...] which had made it so beloved (in the last century) to become absorbed in a deeper selfreflective state which [...] threatened to deny the novel’s existence as a realistic narrative of something outside itself” (Hutcheon 13). By not adhering to the style of writing and literary criticism that had come to be expected by those that subscribed to the manner of thinking that Hutcheon argues against, metafiction could be seen as a lesser form of writing. As such, literary criticism and the possibility to properly interact with narratives becomes only accessible to those with the knowledge of what is considered correct regarding genre. Nonetheless, by using books as a key, and in this instance Yu’s story *How to Live Safely*, we can approach the idea of us unlocking the door for an outside perspective of the box this story belongs to just as Charles uses his book to finally step outside his box. With this, readers can begin by exposing the walls of the box for the cheap construction it is, built to separate and sell ideas which lead to the creation of passive readers and a set idea on how to understand literature.

In the story, Charles unlocks the compartment in the box to find a diorama of the kitchen in his childhood home, created his father that bought him the box. We, as readers, can do a similar thing. The reader can look to see the real-world counterparts that have necessitated the construction of the box, to begin with.

Having the writing process be part of the narrative in an overtly parodic style allows Charles to examine the events that brought him to be stuck in the time loop. In the story,

when Charles lifts the walls of the box to reveal what is in the secret compartment, he finds another instance of time travel. He gets a snapshot of the past from an outside perspective. This is the final piece that allows him to find his father that has been lost in the past. With this Charles can use the book he himself is responsible for writing to get the outside perspective needed to finally find his father. Looking at this from the perspective of a reader, Charles is no longer passively content within the construct of the boxes. The parody of process over product resulted in a series of questions that eventually leads to Charles pursuing a life outside his box (Yu 233). He is now the active author of his narrative and is no longer trapped in the set discourse created by the older generation of literary criticism that his father represents. Through engaging with a parodic, self-aware narrative, Charles has been granted the opportunity to re-identify himself in his reality after losing his father. Yet this time, he breaks free from the walls of the box that was creating his identity around his love-object and instead transforms his suffering into a conscious state. He has been given insight into himself and his linguistic identity to finally have the opportunity to move on. As Charles himself mentions near the end of his story, “I’d thought that my father was the key to my escape from the loop. [...] when in fact the answer all along was not an answer but a choice. [...] If I want to see him again, I have to get out of this box” (Yu 218).

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion: This essay aimed to look at the relationship between Charles and his father to see how they can be read as a representation of a set literary discourse. Charles becomes the manifestation of a reared that is set in a rigid critical approach towards literature which has been defined by older generations represented by his father. The only way Charles can interact with the narrative that constitutes the world he lives in is through the same perspective as his father had done, a perspective that is passed on to him after losing his father. The way that Charles can create his own perspective is by using metafictional narratives as a key to step outside the box that he has shut himself in and that limits his worldview. By using Freud’s theories, it is clear that Charles displays many of the effects that come with melancholia. His act of shutting himself away from the world around him may not resonate with the typical behavior Freud reports seeing in his subjects. However, having Charles live inside his time machine that builds on his own father’s invention, as well as his

job working with time machines shows that he has built his entire personality around his lost father. This reinvention of personality is reminiscent of how Freud describes when the libidinal emotions get attached to the ego and have the subject identify themselves with the memories of the lost love-object. By staying stationary in space, Charles holds his cathexis hostage from himself as he never moves on. Yet as we can see, this changes when he is forced to step out of his box. When meeting, and subsequently shooting, his future self, he springboards the events that will eventually allow him to once again interact with the world outside his time machine. His death, or what he thinks will be his death, becomes the substitute for the unsolved trauma of losing his father, never getting to properly say goodbye. This one act of defiance marks the beginning and end of his transformation through language.

During the events inside the time loop, Charles is afforded the same perspective on his own narrative that Hutcheon proposes is granted by parodic writing. Charles gets to revisit past events, now with a distance that allows for objective criticism. This new perspective is explained by his interaction with the gift he got from his mother. The toys inside and the box they came in help to understand how rigid conventions only work to suffocate novels that are never allowed to create beyond their genre. By literally assuming the role of the author, echoing Hutcheon's ideas on the reader-writer parallel, Charles can gain a new agency in his narrative. This newfound agency is what helps Charles exit the time loop that he is stuck in, and go on to once more take his place in the world outside his box.

In further questioning this text, one could look at Hutcheon's ideas of readers as cosufferers with the narration. Arguing that Charles locking himself in a space of non-temporality mimic the act of the reader who chooses to not continue reading the story. This could be expanded upon by seeing the act of continued reader as a choice to participate in suffering. Such work would echo both the ideas of reader poetics as introduced by Hutcheon, as well as the already inherent theme in Yu's writing of Buddhist ideas of suffering temporality.

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