

**Ryan's Variable Reality in Durang's *Miss Witherspoon*:
A Possible-Worlds Approach**

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Abstract:

During the postmodern era, the concept of 'absolute reality' has been replaced by the concept of 'pluralism'. Reality in the postmodern works has been deliberately mystified to open the realm for an indefinite number of possibilities through subjective perception and interpretation. Possible Worlds Theory (PWT) is a postmodern theory that has an explanatory power in discovering the hidden layers of meanings in the work of fiction with their variable realities. Postmodern absurd drama is selected for this study because of its great potential of presenting works with no clear center and no fixed reality, leading to ambiguity which would be a rich medium for the application of PWT. Marie Laure Ryan is a literary scholar and critic whose possible worlds typologies and techniques will be applied to Miss Witherspoon (2005) by the American dramatist, Christopher Durang. The rationale behind choosing Durang's play is that it is one of Durang's most absurd plays which presents a rich field for PWT application. The purpose of this study is to apply Ryan's modal system of fictional worlds, the types of possible worlds, and the typology of accessibility relations to the postmodernist absurd play, Miss Witherspoon (2005), in an attempt to unravel the possible meanings and the variable reality projected in the text. The study also highlights the different types of conflict as approached by Ryan, occurring between the different worlds and its significance in creating multiple meanings and possible realities.

Key Words: Variable reality, Possible worlds theory, Postmodernism, absurd drama

Reality, in the postmodern thinking, has no longer been objective or presenting absolute truth; it has become a mirror for limitless possibilities and ideas. Being skeptical of notions which seem to be accepted by all groups, cultures and traditions, postmodernism stresses the relative truths of each person. To postmodernists, reality is subjective as it is perceived through our interpretations of what the world means to us individually; this makes it variable and relative. Variable reality has become inherent in postmodern literary texts through their playfulness and continuous recentering of events. Postmodern fiction has found in the concepts of Possible Worlds Theory (hereafter PWT) an explanatory power for its games of subversion. The theory of possible worlds has been used with literary texts to unravel numerous layers of meanings and trace the multiple worlds in postmodern fiction. This close relation between postmodern fiction and PWT is reflected through the plurality of worlds in these works and the multiplicity of meaning through interpretation.

Recognizing how possible worlds are generated, perceived, and interpreted in a postmodern fictional world requires an understanding of postmodern features and characteristics.

Marie Laure Ryan (1946-) is an American literary theorist and critic whose contributions to PWT has enriched it. The modal system of fictional worlds, the types of the private worlds of characters and 'the typology of accessibility relations' are three of her major contributions to the theory that will be explained and applied to a postmodernist absurd text. Christopher Durang's *Miss Witherspoon* (2005) is selected for this paper as a representation of postmodernist drama which is a genre thought to present a rich medium for PWT application. This is because the postmodernist absurd texts usually violate logic, natural laws and chronology, leading to impossibility, contradiction, and ambiguity. All these characteristics are the catalyst for creating an indefinite number of possibilities with variable truths. Therefore, the aim of this research paper is to explore the variable reality resulting from the postmodernist absurd text, *Miss Witherspoon* (2005), using Marie Laure Ryan's techniques, such as possible worlds' modal system, the typology of accessibility relations and the catalogue of the private worlds of characters. The paper also draws on the contributions of major postmodern theorists such as Brian McHale and Jorge Luis Borges in an attempt to examine the postmodern features in the text that lead to the manipulation of reality.

For ensuring an effective analysis and application, an extensive **background** will next be provided about the origin of PWT, the features of the postmodern absurd drama that are relevant to the study, the contributions of Marie Laure Ryan to the theory that will be applied to the text and a synopsis of the selected play

The concept of 'possible worlds' generally refers to the idea that more than one world might exist. The concept was first inspired by philosophy and logic but has proven its interdisciplinarity as it has been later developed and adopted by several disciplines, including fictional worlds. The origin of the concept of possible worlds is traced back to the 17th century and is associated with the German philosopher Gottfried Leibniz. In *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence and Narrative Theory*, Marie Laure Ryan mentions that Leibniz believed that many possible worlds existed as thoughts in the mind of God where "only one world of all these possible worlds is actual ... [which is] the one that we live in and is what we call reality" (16). By 20th century, Leibnizian concept was adopted by

philosophers and logicians (16). Ryan explains in “Possible Worlds and Accessibility Relations: A Semantic Typology of Fiction” that Saul A. Kripke proposed a ‘modal structure’ for the universe that consists of G, K, R, where K is the set of all possible worlds, G is the actual world and R is the relation of relative possibility or accessibility (554). For accessing possible worlds, Ryan further confirms in “Possible Worlds Theory” that they must be connected to the center by ‘accessibility relation’, which means that every world respects the principles of non-contradiction and the excluded middle. An accessible world has a proposition p or its opposite $not\ p$ but can’t have a middle state (Semino 62). For example, the person is either ‘dead’ or ‘not dead’, but he can’t adopt a middle proposition ‘dead’ and ‘not dead’.

Since the late 1970s, literary theorists have also adopted and further developed the notion of possible worlds. The theory has been developed and enriched through the contributions of remarkable literary theorists such as David Lewis, Eco, Pavel, Doležel, and Ryan. The questions they raised have also influenced postmodern critics such as McHale, Borges and Baudrillard which have their further contributions that have been associated with this theory. Ruth Ronen mentions that PWT is adopted to solve some literary issues. For example, it is used as a descriptive tool through “semiotic deciphering” of texts that belong to some literary trends, such as postmodernism (Ronen 19). Accordingly, this helps unravel numerous layers of meanings and trace the multiple worlds in postmodern fiction. It also enables theorists to examine the accessibility relations between fictional worlds and reality (25). Literary theorists have enriched PWT through their contributions by describing the modal system of these worlds. To them, in the world of fictional domain, the fictional text establishes a new actual world which imposes its laws on the reader and determines its own horizon of possibilities. On the course of fiction these possibilities are either actualized or non-actualized. As mentioned above, impossible worlds in the field of philosophy and logic which violate the law of non-contradiction and excluded middle are inaccessible. However, in the world of fiction, impossibility is accepted as one grade of possibility which makes it accessible and which is counted as a remarkable contribution of Marie Laure Ryan to PWT. The reader also plays an effective role in the process of accessing these worlds. Lubomir Dolezel, in *Heterocosmica*, states that the world of fiction is “constructed by its author and the reader’s role is to reconstruct it” (21). Readers visit the fictional lands and “intermingle with heroes” (Pavel 85). However, the process of accessing the fictional worlds requires minimal departure, so, the readers have to fill in the gaps in the

text by assuming the similarity of the fictional world to their own reality. Pavel adds that the principle of 'minimal departure' projects impersonation which works only if the fictional setting is taken seriously and imagined as real (89). Umberto Eco in *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* adds that the process of fictional reading entails filling in the gaps, depending on the reader's personal information that he/she has about the real world (178). The reader has to live the experience, accepting all violation to natural laws and physical compatibility. This fact has taken the reader into other worlds that are totally different which has opened the medium for rich interpretation of the hidden meanings in these worlds.

Postmodernist absurd drama is selected for this study for the great capability of this genre to reflect the postmodern condition, creating a world open for multiple interpretations that depend on one's perception. Albert Camus provides a definition of 'absurdity' through the portrayal of the condition of man while trying to seek meaning in a meaningless universe. He views man as a "stranger" in a world of exile with no memories or hope in the future. (6). Defining the world as absurd reflects the sense of loss, purposelessness and bewilderment that followed World War II with its atrocities and mass destruction, portraying the world as "incomprehensible place" (5). These factors acted as the catalyst that has hastened the emergence of the absurd drama during the second half of the twentieth century. Martin Esslin believes that the theatre of the absurd reflects the true life of that time and provides a picture of a world "without faith, meaning, and genuine freedom of will" (6). Jean-Paul Sartre also adds that the term 'theatre of the absurd' constitutes three main rejections, which relatively stimulate the projection of possible worlds (67). The first is rejecting the traditional character's development and rather presents a trapped character in an incomprehensible world or situation. In absurd drama, the hero has no past or a potential future, becoming "grotesque, [and] incomplete" (Sartre 68). Characters are confused, failing to comprehend the logic behind their existence or understand the world they live in. All these factors make the identification with the characters almost impossible. Successful and creative presentation of absurd drama requires dramatists' potential for great 'playfulness', 'invention' and 'fantasy' (68). Sartre's second rejection is the refusal of traditional plot structures. The plot, in the absurd drama, is usually fragmentary with bits and pieces brought together and with no guaranteed ending. Its purpose is not to reflect life, but to create an autonomous situation in a condensed way with no reference to anything outside it. The third aspect of his rejection is the

refusal of absolute truth, believing that each work of art must create its own reality. That is why, “the action takes place in non-defined locations, within surrealist, distorted, subjective, dream-like settings” (68). Claude Schumacher emphasizes that Sartre’s description of the theatre of the absurd in the second half of the twentieth century still applies to contemporary absurd drama. To him, contemporary absurd dramatists are greatly affected by the aspects of the theatre of the absurd and their forerunners (473).

The absurdist drama reflects many postmodern characteristics. Man in the postmodern era rejects the essence of everything and everybody. This is because the essence of anything is based on human perception which is related to his condition and his choice. So, if Man’s situation and circumstances change, his notions and perception will change and consequently, his choices too. These changes will lead to confusion and the inability of prediction (Afarini and Shoalehsaadi 183). The major characteristics that are associated with the postmodern condition of absurd drama are: refusing autonomy of structure, model idea and opinion. The character doesn’t have a fixed model. Decentralization of a narrative is another characteristic associated with postmodernist absurd drama. Postmodern playwrights create their non-centralized narratives, abandoning the mono-dimensional works which abided by a criterion based on rationality and that had to be followed (183). All these features present a suitable medium for stimulating possible worlds in the minds of the characters and readers with potential meanings.

Marie Laure Ryan is a Key figure in this study due to her valuable contributions to possible worlds theory, leading to its enrichment. The paper examines Ryan’s major contributions to PWT and uses them in analyzing the selected text. Some of these contributions are explained and introduced before the analysis. One of these contributions to be explained before the application is Ryan’s ‘modal system’ of fictional worlds. Ryan starts from the premise that reality has a modal structure as it consists of an actual world (AW) surrounded by an indefinite number of alternative possible worlds (APWs). In *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence and Narrative Theory*, Ryan regards fictional worlds as systems of reality where one world acts as actual (AW), “surrounded by a variety of domains that count as non-actual [APW], such as wishes, dreams, fantasies, and so on” (554). To her, the essence of fiction making lies in the process of ‘recentering,’ and relocation of events due to the continuous actualization of the possibilities generated from the text (553). This perpetual shifting in events, moving from a possibility to actuality

and from one center to another while having no fixed center illustrates how the notion of possible worlds is relevant to the study of literary texts (Semino 67). Marie Laure Ryan's other remarkable contribution to PWT is 'the typology of accessibility relations'. Ryan has developed a typology for accessing the APW from AW through the actual world of the text (hereafter TAW) (Ryan 558-9). The typology presents the different properties of fictional works. The genre of the text and the degree of its possibility and its accessibility are all determined by the relations provided in Ryan's typology. The following is Ryan's typology of accessibility relations which is considered one of the important contributions that added to PWT.

(A) Identity of properties (abbreviated A/properties): TAW is accessible from AW if the objects common to TAW and AW have the same properties.

(B) Identity of inventory (B/same inventory): TAW is accessible from AW if TAW and AW are furnished by the same objects.

(C) Compatibility of inventory (C/expanded inventory): TAW is accessible from AW if TAW's inventory includes all the members of AW, as well as some native members.

(D) Chronological compatibility (D/chronology): TAW is accessible from AW if it takes no temporal relocation for a member of AW to contemplate the entire history of TAW. (This condition means that TAW is not older than AW, i.e. that its present is not posterior in absolute time to AW's present. We can contemplate facts of the past from the viewpoint of the present, but since the future holds no facts, only projections, it takes a relocation beyond the time of their occurrence to regard as facts events located in the future.)

(E) Physical compatibility (E/natural laws): TAW is accessible from AW if they share natural laws.

(F) Taxonomic compatibility (F/taxonomy): TAW is accessible from AW if both worlds contain the same species, and the species are characterized by the same properties. Within F, it may be useful to distinguish a narrower version F' stipulating that TAW must contain not only the same inventory of natural species, but also the same types of manufactured objects as found in AW up to the present.

(G) Logical compatibility (G/logic): TAW is accessible from AW if both worlds respect the principles of non-contradiction and of excluded middle.

(H) Analytical compatibility (H/analytical): TAW is accessible from AW if they share analytical truths, i.e. if objects designated by the same words have the same essential properties.

(I) Linguistic compatibility (I/linguistic): TAW is accessible from AW if the language in which TAW is described can be understood in AW (Ryan, "Possible Worlds and Accessibility Relations" 558-9).

Ryan, in the same book, notes that fictional universes always differ by at least one property from our own system of reality even if the sender of the fictional text pretends that everything is exactly the way it is (561). The main strength of Ryan's framework is that it considers possibility as a graded notion. So, by using her typology, we do not exclude the fiction that contains logical impossibilities, such as in absurd works. In her view, there is no impossible fictional world and that a world's actuality, possibility or impossibility is rather a matter of degree (Semino 62).

Christopher Durang (1949 -) is an American absurdist playwright. Alexis Greene describes him as a moralist who has been attacking "insincere and dangerous human behavior with that ancient theatrical tool, critical laughter" (39). He has presented outrageous absurdist plays that are described by Elena Semino as "inconsistent due to the logical impossibilities that they contain" (65). They are also fluctuating and skeptical towards any sort of coherent narrative or features which are typically postmodernist. Christopher Durang's play, *Miss Witherspoon* (2005), traces the journey of Veronica through its several phases, before death, after death and after several reincarnations in an attempt to transform her morally into a better personality. Veronica is a middle-aged woman who has led an unhappy life due to failing relationships and other depressing circumstances that she can't cope with. She commits suicide, thinking that death would lead her to eternal peacefulness and oblivion. Unexpectedly, after committing suicide, she finds herself with other spirits, waiting in a room in a place of netherworld called the Bardo, in the middle of nowhere with other spirits. They are waiting for their reincarnation which is meant to teach them a lesson about life because they used to adopt a bad attitude on earth. Maryamma, the Chief of spirits, is responsible for their reincarnation. Veronica "is refusing to reincarnate" (Durang 9). She wants "just to be left alone to fester and brood in [her] bodiless spirit state" (8). Though resisting the idea of returning to the scary world, she is reincarnated against her own will several times. She is reincarnated as a cranky with decent parents (world one), as an infant but this time with violent, abusive, drug-taking parents who abuse their baby daughter (world two), and as a puppy (world three). Every time, Veronica is sent to a new world, she either commits suicide or gets herself killed, returning to the starting point, Bardo. She is then reincarnated as a baby but this time she is sent back to worlds one and

two to fix her mistakes. Veronica learns the moral lesson of life; all our lives are interconnected, the decision of one person affects the life of the people surrounding him/her. She also learns that though life may be full of depressing situations, our role is to try to make things work out.

Christopher Durang's *Miss Witherspoon* (2005) is analyzed through Ryan's approach of 'modal system' to detect possible worlds with their variable reality. In "Possible-Worlds Theory," Ryan explains the 'modal system' by introducing the world of the writer and the reader as the actual world (AW). The writer writes the text which presents the actual world (TAW) and serves as the "real world" for the characters of that text. Various Alternative Possible Worlds (APW) surround this (TAW). This structure of worlds (AW, APW and TAW) stimulates the existence of variable reality due to the relative perception and interpretation of events which is a pivotal feature of postmodernism. The variable reality resulting from the modal system, introduced above, is illustrated in Durang's *Miss Witherspoon* (2005) as follows:

Veronica: (barks happily) Rrrrrrfff rrrrrrfff rrrrrrrrfff!

Man: That's a good boy. Go get the ball!

...

The man prepares to throw it out again.

Okay, good boy, get it now!

Man throws the ball again.

Veronica runs after it, panting happily. She gets it in her mouth and runs back to him.

Good boy. You want a treat?

Veronica is thrilled out of her mind. Wags tail, looks ecstatic. Man gives imaginary treat and Veronica indicates she's chewing it up, very happy

(Durang 38).

Veronica's new world after being reincarnated as a dog acts as the new actual world in the text. However, this action is subject to multiple possibilities depending on how this action is perceived by other characters surrounding her. The inhabitants of this world which Veronica is sent to as a dog view her reality as a dog which they own. Maryamma, the Chief of spirits, who lives in another world outside Veronica's one view Veronica as a soul. But how does Veronica view herself? As a dog or as a spirit or as a human being? And how do readers view Veronica? As a dog or as a spirit? Or do they view her as a human being who is falls asleep and is just dreaming? This last possibility or proposition is favored

as it has been supported by several instances. One of the reasons for supporting the last claim is when Maryamma tells Veronica, “Have some ginger tea. I’ll be back later” (Durang 43). A question that readers should consider here is how a spirit drinks tea!!! Furthermore, some readers may accept the idea that Veronica is a spirit but is dreaming while she is in the Bardo, having some rest and closing her eyes. Despite the fact that several interpretations and propositions are projected as a result of this action, it is clearly noted that the writer is able to confuse reality with non-reality. This presents a distinctive feature of the postmodernist absurd drama in which the borders between the real and the non-real become blurred and shattered. Readers along with Veronica wonder “Is that reality or was that part of a dream?” (53). All these questions present different propositions depending on how each one involved in this system perceives events and consequently produces a reality of his own.

Ryan further elaborates on the modal system of fictional worlds by introducing the concept of recentering which plays an important role in the processing of worlds and generating possibilities. The continuous actualization of possible worlds on the course of events leads to the continuous recentering of worlds. Through the process of recentering, the alternative possible world is placed at the center of the universe and becomes the actual. The reader of the text, in this process, is a temporary member of the recentered system, shifting his attention from the actual to the possible world which then becomes the actual then moving to another possible world in a non-ending cycle. (557). The following lines from the play present another illustration of this process of actualization.

Mother: Hello, darling. Hello there. Yes. It’s Mommy. Hello. Good morning. How did precious sleep?

Veronica: Ga ga. Goo goo. Ma-ma-ma! Ma-ma-ma!

Mother: Yes, ‘Mama!’

...

Veronica: Ma-ma-ma! Ma-ma-ma!

Mother: One less syllable, dear. Ma-ma.

Veronica: Ma-ma-ma! Ma-ma-ma! (*to herself; her adult voice*) Oh God, I’m a baby again. Oh Lord, no I can’t go through this again, it’s endless (Durang 17).

As noted above, Veronica's TAW is being a baby in her first reincarnation experience. This event that acts as the actual world of the text is surrounded by different possibilities and propositions. First possibility is that she might not accept this experience but cope with it or she might accept it and learn from it to change to the better. A third proposition is that she might reject this experience and end it up. Veronica actualizes the third possibility by ending her life by provoking the fierce dog and making it attack the baby leading to its death. The actual event of being killed exposes her to several possibilities: will she finally achieve her eternal peacefulness through death or will she go back to the Bardo? It is worth noting that the fictional recentering in the previous example is a central property of literature.

The decentralization of the narrative as approached by Ryan is manifested in postmodernist absurd texts through the sense of loss, bewilderment in a distorted, unidentified place. Veronica's depicting Camus and Sartre as visions in the play reflects Camus' description of Man's sense of loss, and purposelessness (Camus 6). This is clear when Veronica says, "I want blackness, I want nothing" (Durang 21). Veronica's status within this setting, being unmotivated, drifting aimlessly in a 'non-defined,' 'dream-like' setting reflects also how Sartre views Man in this absurd world. (Sartre 68).

Variable reality and multiplicity of worlds as approached through Ryan's modal system and the recentering of narratives are further emphasized through the views of the postmodern Argentinian writer and critic Jorge Luis Borges through his concepts of 'the labyrinth' and 'the forking paths'. He views the world as fragmentary which is reflected through his concept of "the labyrinth" in his literary texts to present this fragmentary world (Garrigos 19). He considers this world to be a mirage of coherence and reason (22). To him, the world lacks rational order where there is no true answer for one's questions in this world (28). John Barth says that "A labyrinth, after all, is a place in which, ideally, all the possibilities of choice (of direction in this case) are embodied, and ... must be exhausted before one reaches the heart" (75). The real issue is that we never reach this center or that "heart". The image of the 'labyrinth' functions well if applied to postmodern texts. In *Miss Witherspoon* (2005), this is illustrated through the labyrinthine journey that Veronica has to go through, reaching no truth or end. Veronica is lost in Jorge Luis Borges' labyrinth, but according to his description of the labyrinth, she is trying to produce "mental labyrinths of [her] own as explanations of the chaotic Great Labyrinth" (Bowman 8). She moves in

a path and takes decision according to her wishes but finds herself taken to another path or world with different reality. For example, during her attempts to achieve peacefulness, Veronica faces several possibilities and choices. When she chooses one of these possibilities which is “I committed suicide”, thinking that she has finally achieved her dream, she finds herself facing other forking and branching paths from which she has to make another choice. It is a continuous labyrinthine process with no center. When Veronica is reincarnated as a baby, she has several forking paths: whether to accept the experience without taking any action or to accept her new life willingly and learn from it or to end this experience. Veronica chooses to end her life by provoking the family’s dog which killed her as a baby. This action brings her to another reincarnating experience which has placed her on other forking paths from which she has to re-choose. This cycle reflects the labyrinthine nature of the plot taking us from one world to another endlessly with no center. The intricate paths that the reader has to take are presented through the maze of narrative levels and voices which mingle and confuse us. This is because the way to the center or the heart of the labyrinth is taken through the fragments on that path or text that lead us to the center which turns out to be another labyrinth (Garrigos 31). We find that what we believe to lie in the center of the labyrinth is just another labyrinth. Barthes Ronald calls this elusive truth which emphasizes the plurality of literary texts thus, “replete with multiple, discontinuous, accumulated meanings” (200). This elusive truth is achieved by mixing the fictitious and the real or by being confused by the falsity of things that seem to be real or by the reality of other things that look unreal (201).

Brian McHale has also elaborated on the nature of the postmodern text that emphasizes Ryan’s modal system and its perpetual recentering. **He emphasizes the importance of ‘the dominant’ in the postmodernist works which is quite relevant to the concept of variable reality. The dominant in the postmodern works is ontological which employs strategies that raise questions about the origin of the world as follows:**

Which world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it? Other typical postmodernist questions bear either on the ontology of the literary text itself or on the ontology of the world which it projects, for instance: What is a world? ; What kinds of world are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ?; What happens when different kinds of world

are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated?; What is the mode of existence of a text, and what is the mode of existence of the world (or worlds) it projects?; How is a projected world structured? (McHale 10).

As we note, the main focus is on the origin of worlds as the world itself comes into question. Veronica's movement from one world to another raises the main question about each world she inhabits. Brian McHale emphasizes that the ontology of each world may be perceived differently from one character to another and from one reader to another (113). A world that may be viewed as primary or 'diegetic' might be secondary or 'hypodiegetic' by another one. Veronica being unsure whether she is dreaming or not, at some point in the play, brings the ontology of her world into question.

The second major contribution of Marie Laure Ryan to Possible Worlds Theory is providing us with a catalogue of the types of the private possible worlds of the characters in the fictional universe. In "Possible Worlds and Accessibility Relations: A Semantic Typology of Fiction", Ryan states that the possible worlds of the characters are represented through their beliefs, wishes, intentions, and fantasies of the characters that inhabit the actual domain (554). In her book *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence, and Narrative Theory*, she introduces the first type which is the Knowledge Worlds represented by what characters know or believe to be the case in the actual domain (20). The second is the Hypothetical Extensions of Knowledge Worlds, represented by the characters' hypotheses about future developments in the actual domain. The third is the Intention Worlds, represented by the characters' plans to cause changes in the actual domain. The fourth is the Wish Worlds, represented by alternative states of the actual domain that are desirable or undesirable for a particular character or group. The fifth is the Obligation Worlds, represented by alternative states of the actual domain that are good or bad according to the moral principles of a certain character or group. The last is the Alternate or Fantasy Universes, represented by the characters' dreams, fantasies, hallucinations, or by the fictions composed by the characters themselves (20).

The correspondence between the different types of worlds of the characters determines whether there is conflict or not. In her article, "Possible-Worlds Theory," she clarifies that when there is a perfect correspondence between the actual world and all subworlds within the

fictional universe, the situation may be described as one of ‘equilibrium’: everybody has complete knowledge of the actual world, everybody’s wishes are realized, all moral obligations are fulfilled, and so forth. However, when the correspondence is less than perfect, the situation generates conflict, which leads to some action being taken by one or more characters. In *Miss Witherspoon* (2005), Veronica builds her intention of killing herself on incorrect knowledge taken from her Knowledge world that death will satisfy her wish of leading eternal peacefulness in her Wish world, violating all her obligations represented in the Obligation world. The wrong information that Veronica receives from her Knowledge world thinking that death will help her achieve tranquility leads her to more suffering. It is the non-correspondence between Veronica’s Wish world and Obligation world that causes conflict throughout the whole play. This is clear in the following lines when Veronica ends her second reincarnated life as a teen by an overdose, thinking that she will have eternal peacefulness; however, taking her back to the starting point of the Bardo.

Veronica is back in the bardo. She’s a bit shell-shocked.

Veronica: Oh God.

Enter Maryamma.

Maryamma: (*disapproving, maybe angry*) I see you’re back.

Veronica: That was horrible! How could you do that to me? I had no chance in that situation, that was pure hell.

Maryamma: No one did it to you, Miss Witherspoon. You should make the choice of the life that will teach you the lesson you need to learn.

Veronica: What lesson was that? Life is hell? I already knew that.

Maryamma: I can’t explain it to you fully. It’s not punishment, but it’s karma, we have to learn. And you keep killing yourself, that doesn’t make good karma. You don’t get ahead with suicide.

Veronica: Next time you try to reincarnate me, I’m going to be able to stop it again. I know I will (Durang 33).

The above lines present how conflict keeps the plot from moving forward as it always brings the events back to the starting point which is the

Bardo. Resisting to learn the lesson causes the process to start all over again.

The labyrinthine plot resulting from the continuous recentering of events in *Miss Witherspoon* (2005) creates a non-linear, recursive structure which presents McHale's Chinese Box technique to detect multiple worlds and layers in postmodern works. The play embeds and nests worlds "as in the set of Chinese boxes" which interrupts and complicates "the ontological 'horizon' of the fiction, multiplying its worlds" (McHale 112). Veronica has firstly belonged to a world or diegesis which is our living world until she finds herself belong to another world in the middle of nowhere called the Bardo. The Bardo projects a *hypodiegetic* world, one level "down" from the main diegesis. We are not sure if Veronica in this level is really dead or is dreaming. This level is also followed by other deeper interconnected *hypodiegetic* levels through which she moves downwards, upwards and backwards. With the series of her reincarnation, Veronica enters the *hypo-hypodiegetic* world and so on. McHales clarifies that an additional "hypo" is being prefixed for each level as we descend "deeper" into ... the "stack" of narrative levels" (113). Douglas R. Hofstadter calls this a spiral configuration as a 'Strange Loop.' He explains that the 'Strange Loop' phenomenon occurs "by moving upwards (or downwards) through the levels of some hierarchical system, we unexpectedly find ourselves right back where we started" (10). Hofstadter calls the system in which a 'strange loop' occurs a 'tangled hierarchy' which occurs "when what you presume are clean hierarchical levels take you by surprise and fold back in a hierarchy-violating way" (686).

Brian McHale's Chinese box technique employs further tools detected in the text which help in multiplying the worlds as traced by Ryan's catalogue of worlds. Veronica is reincarnated five times and each time she either moves backwards or upwards then backwards. These five times are enough to give us this feeling of 'infinite regression'. To McHale, "Infinity can be approached, or at least evoked, by repeated *upward* jumps of level as well as by *downward* jumps" (115). This reminds us of the concept of 'tangled hierarchy' as we feel that the plot is moving hierarchically from one world to another and from the diegesis, which is the primary world presented on earth, to the *hypodiegesis*, which is the secondary world or the Bardo, and to the *hypo-hypodiegesis*, which is presented through the different worlds in which she has been reincarnated. However, this hierarchical movement is a tangled one,

because it always takes us back to the same point. This creates the effect of ‘*trompe l’oeil*’, which is an effect that causes the readers’ inability to distinguish between the real and the non-real. This is clear when Veronica in world number four is reincarnated back to world two as a teen. She is not definitely sure whether she is dreaming or actually being reincarnated as she says “Is that reality or was that part of a dream?” (53). Consequently, readers too are not sure whether it is a dream or reality.

McHale summarizes the importance of this recursive structure as:

Recursive structures may raise the specter of a vertiginous infinite regress. Or they may dupe the reader into mistaking a representation at one narrative level for a representation at a lower or (more typically) higher level, producing an effect of *trompe-l’oeil*. Or they may be subjected to various transgressions of the logic of narrative levels, short-circuiting the recursive structure. Or, finally, a representation may be embedded within itself, transforming a recursive structure into a structure *en abyme*. The consequence of all these disquieting puzzles and paradoxes is to foreground the ontological dimensions of the Chinese box of fiction (114)

Consequently, the recursive structure leads to ‘infinite regression’, ‘strange loops’, ‘tangled hierarchy’, and ‘*trompe l’oeil*’ which are tools employed by the Chinese box technique for the projection of an indefinite number of worlds that manipulate the ontology of worlds. Ryan’s modal system functions well within McHale’s zones of embedded narratives and Chinese box technique along with Borges’ labyrinthine paths. These paths have led to the creation of a non-linear, recursive and labyrinthine plot which has accordingly led to the generation of multiple worlds and multiple meanings.

Providing a typology of accessibility relations is Ryan’s third contribution to PWT and which has several functions that serve the objectives of possible worlds. Ryan’s typology of accessibility relations have been introduced earlier in the background to pave the way to Ryan’s contributions to PWT. The importance of this typology is that it determines the genre of the work, the degree of its possibility, and consequently, the range of its accessibility. According to many possible worlds theorists, fictional worlds are only possible if they maintain logic,

non-contradiction and excluded middle. A traditional text must respect the laws of excluded middle which states that a proposition p or its opposite $not-p$ must occur in a text where the middle option (neither p nor $not-p$) is excluded (Semino 62). However, Ryan doesn't exclude worlds that demonstrate logical impossibility, such as absurd works, from her typology. She clarifies in "Possible Worlds" that impossibility as a degree of possibility, thus including worlds as fairy tales, absurd works, science fiction, in her typology (62). The paper uses Ryan's typology of accessibility relations to explore the genre, the possibility and the accessibility of the selected text as follows.

Christopher Durang's play violates three major relations in Ryan's typology and the violation of each relation contributes to the further distortion of reality and the projection of new possibilities. One of these violated relations is G/logic. The text presents logical impossibility from the early pages of the play as Veronica says, "I committed suicide in 1990s" (Durang 7). This quote drives the reader to wonder how a dead person can announce her own death. This means that she is adopting a middle state in which she is dead and not dead. This, according to Elena Semino, violates the laws of non-contradiction and excluded middle. Elena Semino mentions that according to the law of non-contradiction, it is not possible that a given proposition p and its opposite $not-p$ are both true in a given world (62). That is why, there is a clear violation of the law of non-contradiction as the proposition of 'Veronica is dead' and 'Veronica is not dead' are both given as true in the text which can't be possible. It also violates the laws of excluded middle as Veronica should be either dead or not dead but she can't adopt a middle state. Another example that violates logic is when Veronica states that she committed suicide in the 1990s as a result of a Skylab collapse, but few lines later, she says "in 1979 they announced that Skylab would eventually be falling from the sky in a little bit" (Durang 7). Readers once more wonder how Veronica dies in the nineties due to an accident that has taken place in the seventies; it is either seventies or nineties. This confusion is done deliberately by the writer which is a distinctive feature of both the absurdist works and the postmodern ones. They open the universe for the projection of multiple worlds bearing indefinite number of meanings.

Violating E/natural laws, introduced in the background, is another distinctive feature of the text. The Bardo is an example for the unidentified world governed by laws and rules that are different from the laws that govern our world. It is a place where space and time have dimensions different than ours. Veronica's perpetual travelling from the

Bardo to earth back and forth violates E/natural laws which is another relation provided in Ryan's typology of accessibility relations. Additionally, her perpetual transformation and reincarnation to other shapes such as a baby, a teen, and a dog highly violates physical compatibility. The third relation that has been violated is the relation of A/property, introduced in the background. Speaking is not a property of dead persons as it is presented in the text through Veronica's words "I died sometime in the nineties" (Durang 8). Drinking Ginger tea is also not a property of a dead person, so how does Maryamma offer Veronica, who is supposed to be a spirit, ginger tea to drink? Maryamma says, "Have some ginger tea. I'll be back later" (43). Sleeping is another example that is not a property of a spirit as "Veronica is seated on a chair, but is asleep" (9).

Ryan's typology has helped us to measure the degree of the possibility for accessing such text. The text has presented a complicated level of possibility because of the logic impossibility it presents; however, according to Ryan it is still possible and accessible. This is because such relations are expected to be violated in the genre of the absurd drama. Absurd drama usually violates G/logic but here violating further relations like E/natural laws and A/property have added to the absurdity of the text which is still accepted in an absurdist text as it is expected to have a degree of impossibility. The integration between the three violated relations has contributed to the presentation of an indefinite number of worlds and meanings which accordingly present variable reality.

In conclusion, this research paper has been designed to use PW notions and techniques in exploring the possible worlds with their variable reality in the postmodern absurd drama. Postmodernist absurd drama has proven to be an effective genre for PWT application; the ambiguity of the text, the sense of loss that the character has experienced, the labyrinthine, non-linear plot and the unidentified setting have all contributed to the creation of multiple worlds with different meanings. In an attempt to discover the hidden meanings and reality in these worlds, Marie Laure Ryan's techniques and typologies of PWs have been used for such investigation. The paper has examined three of Ryan's major contributions to PWT which are the modal system of fictional worlds, the types of the private worlds of the characters, and her typology of accessibility relations. For effective analysis and application, Brian McHale's and Jorge Luis Borges' postmodernist techniques have been also employed to discover the realm of the play. Accordingly, the analysis has emphasized the concept of "variable reality" through unravelling deeper levels of

meaning that present reality which is not fixed, depending on how it is perceived. Finally, the research paper has illustrated how PWT has found in the postmodernist absurd drama a suitable medium for the application of its notions and techniques to generate an indefinite number of worlds, each presenting a reality of its own.

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