

The Dynamic Unity of Reality and Fictionality based upon the Unnatural Narratives in *Once Upon a Time*

Jinshu Yao

Department of Foreign Languages, Beijing Language and Culture University, Beijing, China

Email: 19160336693@163.com

How to cite this paper: Yao, J. S. (2022). The Dynamic Unity of Reality and Fictionality based upon the Unnatural Narratives in *Once Upon a Time*. *Advances in Literary Study*, 10, 163-177.

<https://doi.org/10.4236/als.2022.102013>

Received: February 23, 2022

Accepted: April 8, 2022

Published: April 11, 2022

Copyright © 2022 by author(s) and Scientific Research Publishing Inc. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0).

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



Open Access

Abstract

Created by John Barth in the mid-to-late period of his life, *Once Upon a Time: A Floating Opera* (hereinafter referred to as *Once Upon a Time*) is one of Barth's significant novels which explore various possibilities of literary creation. *Once Upon a Time* was claimed as "a memoir bottled in a novel" by its author, and the reality and fictionality intertwined by recourse to unusual narrative techniques which are probably unfamiliar to readers who are accustomed to read realistic works. In order to make clearer sense of the ways the author utilizes to achieve the dynamic unity of the reality and fictionality in the novel, this article employs theories of unnatural narratology to illustrate those unusual narratives on the basis of close reading of the literary text of the novel. On the ground of the analyses of the interaction between reality and fictionality based upon unnatural narratives, such as the unusual genre, the multiple identities of "I", and the temporal loop, this article concludes that factuality and fictionality or life and art are complementary to each other, as the author of the novel describes that they are "coaxial esemplasy".

Keywords

Once Upon a Time, John Barth, Unnatural Narratives, Factuality, Fictionality

1. Introduction

As a contemporary American novelist, critic and literary theorist, John Barth (born May 27, 1930) is not merely good at storytelling, but an expert in pursuing innovative forms of novel writing. In "The Literature of Exhaustion" (Barth, 1984), Barth claimed that the particular period (of literary realism) in history was passing, and then he explored some possible directions of literature. This

essay is widely considered as a manifesto of postmodernism. Among all his postmodern novels, *Once Upon a Time: A Floating Opera*, “a memoir bottled in a novel” (Barth, 1994) in the form of a three-act opera, presents many unusual features concerning postmodernism.

The critics have carried out extensive research on *Once Upon a Time* from three main perspectives: its themes, autobiographical features and narrative features. For instance, Charles B. Harris (1994) reckons that John Barth is keen to portray a story concerning a hero in his novels and he illustrates some details about the usage of this kind of story in *Once Upon a Time*. In the essay “Setting the Mobius Strip Straight: John Barth’s *Once Upon a Time: A Floating Opera*”, Zack Bowen (1999) defines *Once Upon a Time* as an autobiographical novel. Song Ming (2011) elucidates Barth’s narrative creation in the novel through probing its double narrators, the narrative frame based on opera and other narrative strategies.

Although some critics focused on the narrative features in *Once Upon a Time*, most of them discussed the narrative features based upon the classical narrative theories, and there is little attention paid to the unnatural narrative phenomena in the novel. As a matter of fact, the unnatural narratives in the novel are worthy of attention. *Once Upon a Time* is a typical postmodern novel replete with strange and unusual narrative phenomena which to great extent breach the realist contracts and the traditional readerly expectation. It is therefore quite apposite to clarify these narrative features by virtue of unnatural narrative theories which are systematized based upon analyses of abundant texts, in particular postmodern texts, and aim to proffer theoretical guidance for the analyses of some texts which break the conventions of natural or mimetic narratives. Some unusual narrative features in the novel, such as the shifting referents of “you” and the antirealist characters, may not be discovered or fully comprehended if the work is only discussed from the perspective of classical narrative theories which mainly originate from the natural or mimetic narratives.

Authors of natural or mimetic narratives may spare no efforts to erase the traces of fictionality for the pursuit of representing the actual world as accurately as possible. By contrast, unnatural narratives accentuate the functions of imagination and artificiality through breaching some conventional principles of realistic texts and making narratives physically, logically or humanly impossible (Alber & Rudiger, 2011). To some extent, unnatural narratives depend upon and foreground the profound distinction between factuality and fictionality. Paradoxically, it is also the nature of unnatural narratives that challenge many conventional boundaries, including foundational ones like the factuality and fictionality divide (Richardson, 2015). As John Barth claims that *Once Upon a Time* is “a memoir bottled in a novel”, the work is also replete with factual materials. Furthermore, the better to “sing” the theme of the novel, the author has “reorchestrated” materials concerning his life experiences freely to his purpose (Barth, 1994). In this sense, reality and fictitiousness are dynamically integrated in the

novel. This article will therefore concentrate where possible on points in which factuality and fictionality interact by virtue of various unnatural narrative devices employed in *Once Upon a Time*.

This article mainly discusses the dynamic interaction between factuality and fictionality in *Once Upon a Time* from three aspects. The author firstly tests the boundary between fiction and nonfiction through creating an unnatural genre in the work, namely “a memoir bottled in a novel” within the frame of “a floating opera”. Secondly, the unnoticeable transition between veracity and virtuality is explored from the perspective of unnatural discourse, mainly including the multiple identities of “I” and the shifting referents of “you”. The fusion of veracity into fiction in the impossible story world is finally clarified in the third part, including the fusion of the both sides in the dream-like scene built by the unnatural time and space, and that made by unnatural characters like Jill and the protagonist’s wife.

2. Contesting the Boundary between Fiction and Nonfiction through Unnatural Genre

Experimentally, the author of *Once Upon a Time* firstly tests the boundary between factuality and fictionality by virtue of creating an unnatural genre. In the “Program Note” of the “non-act opera” (Barth, 1994), the author declares that *Once Upon a Time* is “a memoir bottled in a novel”. Roughly, the work as a whole is a novel, but it is not purely a novel, but one filled with narrations concerning his actual life experiences. Besides, the overall work is narrated in the frame of opera. It may hence be more accurate to classify the work into “a memoir bottled in a novel” within the frame of an opera. The employment of such an unusual genre is indeed a compelling way to blur the line between reality and fictiveness. The following analyses will therefore be concerned with how the author converges factuality and fictionality through utilizing this kind of unnatural genre in the novel.

2.1. A Memoir Bottled in a Novel

The story begins with an end-of-season cruise of the protagonist and his wife, but it is eventually disclosed that the journey at sea does not in fact take place because of the wrongly anticipated date. In other words, the sea voyage story at the beginning of the work is fictitious. During the artificial sea voyage, the protagonist and his wife are wrapped into his natal marsh where he encounters his two guides—Jill and Jay Scribner, and then the story comes to the retrospection of his previous life experiences, so a relatively factual memoir begins and continues through the following two acts. When it comes to the third act, the memories stop and the ACT 3 is arranged to present the discussion between the author and the wife about whether this act should be written down to depict the protagonist’s life together with her. This discussion also puts emphasis on the fictionality of the work through displaying the progression of creating the act. Looking back over the general outline of the work, since the retrospection starts

in the middle of the work and stops before the work ends, it indeed seems to be a bottle in which a memoir resides. In this respect, the boundary between fiction and nonfiction is transgressed as factuality is seemingly “bottled” in fictionality.

In addition, the fusion of veracity and fictionality could be also observed in the segment of memoir. It is worthy of note that the two guides Jill and Jay Scribner who lead the retrospection are partly or totally invented characters. As the author explains in the “Program Note” that “My twin sister makes a fictionalized cameo appearance” (Barth, 1994), Jill in the work is created based upon the actual one, but she is also partly fictional. As for Jay Scribner, the author straightforwardly talks about his fictionality as follows,

Nothing in our literal life and tidewater neighborhood corresponds to the portentously named “Jerome Schreiber/Jay Wordsworth Scribner,” his companion Beth Duer, their erstwhile “ecoketch” American Century, and its skipper’s remarkable project of resailing in reverse Columbus’s first voyage’s first half, not to mention his improbable extension of that re-tracement into the eastern Mediterranean, up the Nile, and overland into the African Rift Valley. All fiction. (Barth, 1994)

According to the explanation of the authorial narrator, Jay Scribner is completely an invented character living in the realm of fiction. In other words, any part of recollections concerning Jill might be partly fictive and those memories in relation to Jay Scribner in the memoir are completely artificial. Consequently, real materials intersect with fictional materials in the seemingly real memoir so closely and frequently that they are difficult to be separated from each other.

In a nutshell, the work crisscrosses and blurs the line between factuality and fictionality as the author glides from novel to personal memoir and returns to novel again. Apart from the transition between fiction and nonfiction, some fictional embellishments incorporated into the nonfiction, namely the memoir, also fuse the both sides.

2.2. Fusion of Reality into Fiction in the Frame of Opera

Opera is “a dramatic work in which all or most of the words are sung to music” (Hornby, 2009). An opera usually comprises aria, recital, chorus, duet, overture, interlude and so on. John Barth’s (1956) favor for opera is able to be observed through his first novel entitled *The Floating Opera*. His pursuit for opera in writing goes further in *Once Upon a Time* in which he not merely created “a memoir bottled in a novel”, but also put the combination of memoir and novel into the frame of “a floating opera”.

In order to examine how the author takes advantage of the frame of opera to achieve the interaction between factuality and fictionality, it is very necessary to firstly make sense of the usage of opera in the novel. The employment of the operatic structure can be clearly perceived through an array of subtitles as follows (Table 1).

Table 1. The operatic structure of *once upon a time*.***Once Upon a Time: A Floating Opera*****PROGRAM NOTE**

OVERTURE	<p>Aria: "Our pool is winter-covered"</p> <p>On with the overture:</p> <p>Duet of sorts: "Becalmed, plateaued, suspended"</p> <p>Extended aria: "Suspended passage"</p> <p>Aria: "Why not?"</p> <p>Duet: "Let's do it"</p> <p>Semi-explicatory aria: "Weak Chaos"</p> <p>Extended aria: "This old binder. This old pen"</p> <p>Uncompleted aria: "Our marsh, our marsh"</p> <p>A floating aria: "Water-messages"</p> <p>Aria: "What are we doing here?"</p> <p>Distracted aria: "Bad J Good J"</p> <p>Trianglish aria:</p> <p>Unprogrammed aria: "Sturm und Drang"</p> <p>Mini-duet: "It's not that easy"</p> <p>Mini-soliloquy: "What do we do now?"</p> <p>Unsung duet: "Sure it can."</p> <p>Reprise: "Calmed, becalmed"</p> <p>Preludial coda: "I know these waters... and yet..."</p>
INTERLUDE	<p>Aria: "This is a story I've told before"</p> <p>On with the interlude:</p>
ACT 1	<p>Prospective arietta: "Whoops indeed: This new old pen"</p> <p>Aria: "What I've noticed, reader"</p> <p>Interrupted aria: "Affectionate loyalty; benign passivity. The best complexion"</p> <p>Insistent aria: "Of course we do"</p> <p>Not an aria: "Gawdam cunt!"</p> <p>Aria: "The mother of all fiction"</p> <p>Monologue faute de mieux: The brawlbrat brawl</p> <p>Interruptive, tear-blinded aria: "Oatmeal: 'He jests at scars'"</p> <p>Exegetical aria-within-an-aria: "Jack and Jill"</p> <p>Oatmeal aria resumed and concluded: "My mark"</p>
ENTR'ACTE	<p>Obscured trivial aria: "Y"</p>
ACT 2	<p>Drum solo: "Cunt-shy"</p> <p>Time-out aria: Two-STEP</p> <p>Narrative aria: "Wunderjahr"</p> <p>Unwashed Freudian smegma-flake arietta: "Aha"</p> <p>Okay: On with Act 2</p> <p>Duty-do aria: "The Ur-myth, yes"</p>

Continued

	Ur-myth wrap-up aria: “Straight through the maze,” almost “The Rome of Saint Jerome”: expository catch-up aria Two-part disharmony, Splitsville unduet, story too banal to tell: “Mmp” “Perhaps for lovers.” End-of-1960s aria:
BETWEEN ACTS	An arietta resung: “Plato has Socrates teach”
ACT 3 (OF 2)	Reprise: “What am I doing here?” Semi-(but only semi-)sheepish, semi-(ditto-)explanatory semi-aria or -duet: “As best I can” Rescuaria: “May I... ?” Calendrical-error-assisted narrative Doppler-Effect aria: “On 12 October 1990” The end of this opera, almost. Let me explain:
EPISONG	Aria: “Dante’s Dante” Reprised duet: “Gone”

According to the table chart set forth, the operatic structure in *Once Upon a Time* is presented clearly. Compared with the preface and contents in most works, the author utilizes “Program Note” and “Program” respectively to provide some brief explanations about or outline the contents of the novel before the story confronts readers. Overall, “the floating opera” (Barth, 1994) is made up of three acts with OVERTURE, INTERLUDE, ENTR’ACTE, BETWEEN ACTS and EPISONG. More specifically, various operatic terms, such as aria, duet, reprised duet, monologue, drum solo, are deployed directly in 50 subtitles, accounting for about two thirds of all 99. These subheadings serve to create a certain kind of tone for the following narration and briefly explain its main contents. Besides, readers are reminded frequently that this is an opera sung by four singers, including the protagonist, his twin sister Jill, his friend Jay Scribner and his wife. As the protagonist/narrator speaks of his parents, he claims that “[b]ad luck for you, you spawned a singer inclined to arias on such themes as (all together now) affectionate loyalty. Benign passivity. Cordial etc.” (Barth, 1994). These characters’ status as singers are also described when the wife discusses with the authorial narrator about the content of ACT 3 and complains that “[b]ut not only is this whole so called opera a Song of Thyself; even the sopranos, altos, and baritones are echoes of the lead tenor” (Barth, 1994). Generally, the story is narrated within the frame of an “non-act” opera.

It is also the operatic structure that provides appropriate areas for the transition between memoir and novel and for the fusion of factuality and fictionality. As analyzed above, the journey at sea in OVERTURE is fictitious, and following the relatively real retrospection crossing the first two acts, the ACT 3 returns to some fictive explanations of the whole “opera”. The INTERLUDE, ENTR’ACTE and BETWEEN ACTS hence play a crucial role to unite these actual and fictional parts. In the INTERLUDE, the protagonist comes across Jill and Jay Scribner near to his natal marsh where Jay Scribner explains to the protagonist about the

roles Jill and he would play. That is, they would become his guides to help him accomplish his retrospection of his past. At the end of the INTERLUDE, Jay Scribner says that Jill is awaiting his twin brother and advises the protagonist to turn around to rejoin her. The “opera” then comes to the first act to recount the protagonist’s childhood and adolescence with the help of Jill. Likewise, the ENTR’ACTE and the BETWEEN ACTS are arranged to provide the second and third helpers—Jay Scribner and the wife with a chance respectively to appear in order to lead the retrospection in the following act. It is these sections that offer some possible rooms for the reasonable transition between fiction and nonfiction.

In addition to the intermediate parts are most arias through which the fusion of reality and fictiveness occurs. Arias in *Once Upon a Time* are usually concerned with a certain theme and sometimes with the authorial evaluations about his creation or writing of this work or other works, which also makes it available for fictional characters to seemingly have a rest and communicate with the authorial narrator and sometimes give suggestions about the development of stories. For instance, after the authorial narrator elaborates on the whole “opera” for the wife as a fictional character under the subtitle “Semi-(but only semi-) sheepish, semi-(ditto-) explanatory semi-aria or -duet: ‘As best I can’” (Barth, 1994), the wife makes some comments on the overall work in the next aria “Rescuaria: ‘May I...?’” (Barth, 1994) and proposes that her privacy should be hidden, so the authorial narrator had better not narrate the protagonist’s life together with her. Here the fictitious character and the relatively more factual (implied) author gather in the two arias and communicate with each other. Under this circumstance, the fusion of fictionality and factuality is achieved by virtue of the operatic frame.

John Barth (1984) is keen to create new forms to rebel “against Tradition” and explore various possibilities of literature. In *Once Upon a Time*, he creates an unnatural genre through the combination of memoir, novel and opera, deconstructing the conventional understanding of a singular genre in a work. The work as a whole is indeed a novel in the guise of opera, as the authorial narrator makes the statement that “[h]owever autobiographical in manner and trappings, this ‘overture’ and any opera following it are in fact fiction: a story of my life, by no means *the*” (Barth, 1994). Nevertheless, it is also replete with materials concerning his actual life experiences. As the author declares in the “Program Note” that “[t]he better to sing it, I have passed over or scarcely sounded other themes, and have reorchestrated freely to my purpose”. In other words, he puts some factual materials into a novel and modifies characters and stories based upon those of actual world in order to avoid the risk for falsifiability and foreground the theme of the work better. Such convergence of factuality and fictionality also fully manifests the belief that art comes from life and goes beyond it.

3. Unnoticeable Transition between Veracity and Virtuality through Unnatural Discourse

The unnatural narrative discourse, such as the repeated narrative fissures created

by the author's interruptive narration in *Once Upon a Time*, underscores its fictionality or artificiality, but it is also the unnaturalness in narrative discourse that makes some readers unaware of the transition between veracity and virtuality. For the most parts, if the author did not give his statements with reference to fictionality in the "Program Note" and highlight it throughout the novel, a great many events in terms of the protagonist might be regarded as being factual, which increases the difficulty for readers to perceive the slippage between reality and fictiveness. In what follows, the issue of how the author resorts to the unnatural narrative discourse to achieve the unnoticeable transition between the two sides will be specifically clarified.

3.1. Multiple Identities of "I"

There are several elements that threaten the status of the work as fiction. First of all, the protagonist's name is John Barth and he is a sixty-year-old writer with some repute, which are almost as same as the characteristics possessed by the author who creates the work. Secondly, the use of first-person narration produces a kind of expectation that the author is narrating. The narrative phenomenon that the authorial narrator often appears in the text to make some comments on the novel or his other works increases the sense of bewilderment of whether all "I" narrators are the authorial narrator or not. In addition, that the retrospection of one of the "I"s is accurately identical with the life experiences of the actual author, strengthening the impression that all voices of narrations in the whole work might be from its creator. Actually, as the author claims in the "Program Note", it is just "a memoir bottled in a novel". That is, it is as a whole a novel embedded with some non-fictional embellishments.

A compelling way to unnoticeably transmigrate between reality and fiction is the usage of the first-person narration. In natural or mimetic narratives, the narrator is usually a self-consistent, single, unified and human-like figure. Even though there is more than one narrator in a text, some obvious hints often emerge to distinguish their identities. However, narrators in unnatural narratives may be discontinuous or multiple and fuse with other selves. Besides, few ostensible explanations are utilized for readers to differentiate them. In *Once Upon a Time*, there are two distinct narrators who make their narration in the first-person point of view. More accurately, there are three identities of "I" and the third one is the experiencing self, differing from the narrating self—the storyteller. In most cases, the experiencing self and the narrating self are united into one entity who resides in the fictional story world, whereas the authorial narrator is in the relatively actual level of narration. Intriguingly, two types of transition between these distinct entities are hidden because of the "I" narration throughout the whole novel.

The first one occurs when the narration comes to the memoir. As discussed above, the sea voyage adventures are all fictitious, so the protagonist/narrator in the OVERTURE is completely artificial, but the protagonist in the memoir is the

relatively actual one because it is concerned with the author's life experiences, and the protagonist/narrator here could be identical with the author. With the retrospection beginning in ACT 1, the fictional protagonist is transformed into the relatively actual one. Since both the fictive story concerning the end-of-season cruise in *OVERTURE* and the memoir is narrated in the first-person perspective, the transition is hardly easy to be noticed.

The transition between the fictional protagonist/storyteller and the author might also be unobtrusive because of the employment of first-person narration. Readers are sometimes reminded that the authorial narrator is speaking by directly claiming that this is “[a]uthor speaking” or that “[a]s a rule, reader, I am a thorough planner of my fictions” (Barth, 1994). The reminders such as “author” or “reader” function to give readers some hints to distinguish the identities of “I”, which also help readers to orient themselves when reading the novel. However, some readers might disorient when there is no any obvious reminder for them to discriminate the “I”. For instance, when the protagonist/storyteller who is also a writer and holds a pen from his friend discusses with Jay Scribner about how to walk out of the narrative maze and discover his wife and cutter, the protagonist/storyteller is persuaded to continue the story and he says, “[w]ith a few quick penstrokes—strokes both literal and figurative, of this both actual and virtual pen—I do” (Barth, 1994). The protagonist/storyteller decides to keep writing the story in order to walk out of the narrative maze. Here he points out that his writing is both “literal and figurative” and the pen he holds is “both actual and virtual”, which implies that the author is also writing by holding his actual pen at the moment. In the narration, the author apparently fuses his identity and that of the protagonist/storyteller by virtue of the first-person singular narration. Looking back over the case, the indeterminacy engendered by the multiple identities of “I” makes it possible to easily blur the line between the factuality and fictionality and hide the transition between the both sides.

3.2. Shifting Referents of “You”

Apart from the multiple identities of “I”, the shifting referents of “you” also proffer chances for the transition between fictionality and factuality in the novel. In natural or mimetic texts, the standard narratological models often imply a dichotomous structure: the first- and third-person narration or the homo and heterodiegetic narrative. The usage of the second person narration is rarely observed, not to mention the extended theoretical study. According to Brian Richardson (2006), the second person narratives are “unnatural” from the outset because it does not exist in “natural narrative” and the unnaturalness of the second person narration is mainly manifested by the deictic function of the pronoun “you”. In *Once Upon a Time*, the author employs “you” frequently to address to characters and the actual reader as well as the narrator. The juxtaposition or ever-shifting referents of “you” make it hardly easy to realize the change between veracity and virtuality.

In different contexts, the “you” denotes distinct entities:

You’ve shut down your desk already and fetched out sea and tote bags for filling. Seems we’re going for a sail.

Because you know, don’t you, singer of this extended aria, ...You’re in robust health, I assure myself (*for your age*, the put-down parentheses add), but you’re not age-proof...You can’t jog the four flights from your university office up to the seminar room as erst you could and still speak sentences when you get there.

This has been (*that was*, by when you read this page) a year in which it happened that a number of things in my life and work more or less wound up in relatively quick succession. (Barth, 1994)

Respectively, the “you” in the three paragraphs above refers to the protagonist’s wife who is fictional in the OVERTURE, the narrator himself, and the actual readers who are reading “this page”. Likewise, since there is no any obvious reminder for readers to discriminate the distinct identities of “you”, it is quite easy to mistake these “you” for a same entity. Ostensibly, the narrative slippage between factuality and fictionality occurs owing to the indeterminacy of narration generated by the shifting referents of “you”, as found in the three paragraphs above.

The basic distinction between veracity and virtuality seems to be absolute in most cases, because they imply two types of modes of discourse which possess different functions (Richardson, 2015). The reality designates the actual world, whereas the fictionality denotes the possible world. In natural or mimetic texts, the transition between the both sides is rarely perceived or even completely erased by the author. While the unnatural discursive narratives in *Once Upon a Time* foreground the linguistic construction and artificiality of the novel, it also paradoxically makes it possible to examine the inconspicuous transition between reality and fictiveness at the same time. In particular, the author straddles this boundary between the two sides effectively as the indeterminacy of identities of “I” and “you” are generated throughout the novel.

4. Blurring the Line between Factuality and Fictionality in Impossible Story World

In addition to the unnatural narrative discourse is the impossible story world which provides areas for the interaction of reality and fictiveness. The unnatural time and space, such as the nonlinear time and dream-like spaces, contribute to the feature of fragmentation in the story world, which is in return deployed to enable the characters to transgress between the past, the present and the future. Besides, Jay Scribner the unnatural character who occupies distinct identities in different contexts is himself a combination of reality and fictiveness. When Jay Scribner appears as a fictional character or the “counterself” (Barth, 1994) of narrator, he often makes some comments with the authorial narrator on the novel or other topics and acts in the memories. Such an antirealist character

demonstrates the interaction between factuality and fictionality very well. The following discussion will concern about the interaction of the seemingly absolute binary opposition on the basis of various “unnatural elements” (Shang Biwu, 2015) which contribute to the construction of an impossible story world in *Once Upon a Time*.

4.1. Fusion of Reality into Fiction in Unnatural Time and Space

As a whole, the story world in the novel is characterized by fragmentation due to the anti-mimetic time and space, such as the temporal loop and unusual characters transgressing story-world boundaries, making it possible that the factual time and spaces are put into the impossible story world where characters are endowed with the ability of crossing the past, the present and the future freely.

In the OVERTURE, the authorial narrator discloses the fictional and factual materials, “Chesapeake Bay is real enough, Mary-land’s Eastern Shore, the Chester River and the creek making off it where Mr. and Mrs. Narrator abide. But there is no ‘Potamock Island’ on any of those, no ‘Potamock Point’” (Barth, 1994). According to the statement, readers clearly know about which places are factual and which are fabricated. All these factual and fictional spaces are juxtaposed to construct the fictional story in the OVERTURE.

Except the evident explanation of fictionality and factuality, however, there is usually no any clear statement of the fusion of fictional and factual time or space throughout the overall narration. For instance, at the ending of the interlude, the protagonist encounters his twin sister Jill and his friend Jay Scribner by chance in his natal marsh. In the scene of their encounter, the spaces such as the footbridge where Jill awaits his twin brother, the picnic table and the pine grove are all fictive. These suddenly emerging places contribute to creating a dream-like scene to lay a foundation for the convergence of fictionality and factuality.

When the protagonist rejoins with his twin sister over the footbridge, the narration comes to the beginning of the first act where Jill and the protagonist are looking at a faded “black and white”. Here the transition between the past, the present and the future could be perceived by the narrator saying, “she hugs me lightly with her right arm and gets from her normally affectionate twin no more reciprocation just now, sixty years later, than she got on that lost afternoon Back Then” (Barth, 1994). Readers are informed that Jill abides in the “just now, sixty years later” when the author creates the first act, namely in 1990. Yet the protagonist in the OVERTURE lives in the October 12, 1992. It is contradictory that the protagonist who should have resided in 1992 encounters his twin sister living in 1990. In particular, the authorial narrator does not emerge to give some reasonable explanations for this unlikely narrative phenomenon. It is therefore easy for readers to disorient themselves in the narrative maze. One of ways to explain this unnatural narrative phenomenon might be that the fictional protagonist has been transformed into the relatively actual one who lives in 1990 and is writing the memories. In this sense, this retrospection is, to some extent, the author’s

autobiographical narration. In reality, the dream-like scene created at the ending of interlude provides an area for the fusion of different temporal realms. Since in the scene the protagonist living in the future comes across his two guides who abide in the present, the present and the future are convened. In addition, the picnic table, the suddenly emerging footbridge and other objects further enhance the dream-like atmosphere of the scene. Such a dream-like scene highlights the artificiality of the novel, but it in return generates the possibility of blurring the line between fictionality and factuality. After accepting the encounter of the protagonist and his twin sister Jill in this unnatural time and space, readers are more likely to look at the protagonist in the ACT 1 into their familiar one, namely the one living in the sea voyage story in the OVERTURE. The author therefore accomplishes to blur the boundary between factuality and fictionality in the first act.

Another way to blur the factual and fictional realms is also worthwhile to discuss. That is, the function of unnatural temporal loops in the novel. As the authorial narrator frequently claims that a significant aim of the creation of *Once Upon a Time* is to achieve that the “tell-time” overtakes the “tale-time” (Barth, 1994). In other words, the time of narrating the fictional sea voyage needs to catch up with the moment that the factual sea voyage takes place. This kind of temporal mode challenges the conventional assumption about time that the factual time of story is always considered to precede its narrative time. However, according to the authorial narrator, the story in the OVERTURE was written on the October 12, 1990, and it was set to take place at the dawn of the October 12, 1992. That is, compared with the time of writing the story, this is a story occurring in the future. In order to achieve the aim mentioned above, a memoir is naturally embedded into the novel to postpone the narrative time of the fictional sea voyage till the dawn of the October 12, 1992 when the author and his wife are preparing for their actual journey at sea. Therefore, at the ending of the novel, the author states, “[w]e have vertiginously rearrived at Time’s time-out, Columbus Day 1992: our starting place, almost. The end of this opera, almost” (Barth, 1994). On the dawn of Columbus Day 1992 which is also the ending of the novel, as the authorial narrator says, “tell-time overtook the tale-time”. The author creates a temporal loop by virtue of imagination to achieve the fusion of narrative time of the fictional sea voyage story and the time when the real sailing takes place.

The interaction between unnatural time and space functions to construct an impossible story world in which everything seems to be possible because of the function of imagination and linguistic construction. There is no wonder that it is relatively easy to blur the line between reality and fiction in such a kind of story world.

4.2. Fusion of Reality into Fiction through Antirealist Characters

A rather more obvious method leading to a series of intriguing intersections or

contestations of the boundaries between fictionality and factuality is to create characters who can transgress the story world and interact with the author. Compared with the natural or mimetic characters who are limited in the story world, the characters in *Once Upon a Time* not merely have the awareness of their artificiality, but also often cross the line of story world to communicate with the authorial narrator.

The first example is that the protagonist's twin sister Jill prefers to interact with the authorial narrator when she leads him to recount their memories.

“Well: For the record, I enjoyed our childhood.”

Likewise, Image-of-my-sister. But.

...

And I with you. What I can't tell you but why not? What I can't quite believe, let's say, is that the Jill I'm lost with, here in Wherever, is my literal sister from Hurlock and Hunting Creek. I think of her as going about her business there while I pen these words here with her image...

“The Jill is as real as the Jack, seems to me. Speaking of your pen, can you give it a twist? We've lost our picture.” (Barth, 1994)

It is not difficult to discriminate that the conversation above takes place between the authorial narrator and Jill the fictional character because of the word “Image-of-my-sister”. The “Image-of-my-sister” implies that Jill here is not the actual person, but the fictional character. Besides, only the authorial narrator may call his character as an image to accentuate its artificiality. Jill firstly expresses her enjoyment for their childhood, and then the authorial narrator responds that he also likes it. This presents the interaction between the fictional character and the authorial narrator in the relatively real level of narration. In the last sentence, Jill advises the authorial narrator to “give it a twist” so that they can continue to make recollections of their childhood. The conversation evidently displays that the fictional and factual realms merge as the fictional character crosses the fictional story world to make some comments on the development of story.

The most representative example is Jay Scribner/Jerome Schreiber. Jay Scribner/Jerome Schreiber signifies distinct entities in different contexts. When he refers to a character, he is proved to be completely fictitious and all of stories related to him are also fictional.

Author speaking:

...Nothing in our literal life and tidewater neighborhood corresponds to the portentously named “Jerome Schreiber/Jay Wordsworth Scribner,” his companion Beth Duer, their erstwhile “eco-ketch” American Century, and its skipper's remarkable project of resailing in reverse Columbus's first voyage's first half, not to mention his improbable extension of that retracement into the eastern Mediterranean, up the Nile, and overland into the African Rift Valley. All fiction. (Barth, 1994)

Based upon the statement above, it could be inferred that all recollections concerning the character from ACT 1 to ACT 3 are fictive. The author not only creates the fictional character as his childhood friend, but also embeds a number of fictitious life experiences in relation to the character into his autobiographical narration. On the one hand, such creation and embedment deconstruct the factuality of the retrospection with reference to the author's actual life experiences. On the other hand, they also demonstrate the convergence of factuality and fictionality.

Intriguingly, both the two names Scribner/Schreiber in German designate the writer. In addition, this character is familiar with the progression of the whole story and controls the development of narratives through a fictional wristwatch. Thus, it is more likely that the author sometimes enters the story world in the guise of the character. In this context, the character is himself a combination of factuality and fictionality.

In another novel *The End of the Road*, John Barth (1958) conveys a belief that “[t]o turn experience into speech—that is, to classify, to categorize, to conceptualize, to grammarize, to syntactify it—is always a betrayal of experience, a falsification of it; but only so betrayed can it be dealt with at all...”. That is, the so-called objective reality that is considered to be represented by the medium of language is actually one constructed by language, and such objective reality is not the actual world that language originally refers to. This illustrates the limit of language which cannot represent the actual world accurately, yet such belief also demonstrates that through language can the actual world be made sense better, which reinforces the construction of language. Based upon this belief, the author of *Once Upon a Time* makes full use of the construction of language to create an impossible world in which the frequent interaction between factuality and fictionality becomes possible.

As Lubomir Doležal (1999) admits, there is an “open boundary” between the fictional and factual realms in texts. He asserts that “the relationship between fiction and history” is primarily “a semantic and pragmatic opposition.... Possible worlds semantics has no quarrel with the idea of an open boundary, but couple this acknowledgement with a curiosity to know what happens when the boundary is crossed”. Marie-Laure Ryan (1997) also agrees that there exists an “open border” between the two distinct domains in texts. These “open boundaries” or “open borders” offer areas for the interplay between reality and fiction. With the author of *Once Upon a Time* dancing along the gray areas by recourse to unnatural narratives, the factuality and fictionality are united in the novel effectively and dynamically.

5. Conclusion

This article specifies the interaction between reality and fictionality by virtue of unnatural narratives, including the unnatural genre, unnatural discursive narration and the impossible story. The author of the novel describes the relationship

between fictionality and factuality as “coaxial esemplasy”: “the ongoing, reciprocal shaping of our story (in this case, a story of our life) by our imagination, and of our imagination by our story thus far” (Barth, 1994). In other words, there exists a complementary relationship between fictionality or imagination and factuality in narratives. On the basis of this belief, the author embeds his life experiences into the novel and reinforces the fusion of veracity into the fiction by means of unnatural narratives. This analysis demonstrates that the significance of the novel not only lies in the deconstruction of the conventional assumption that the divide between factuality and fictionality is absolute, but also bases on the exploration of more possibilities for the form of literary creation.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

References

- Alber, J., & Rudiger, H. (2011). *Unnatural Narratives, Unnatural Narratology*. de Gruyter.
- Barth, J. (1956). *The Floating Opera*. Appleton Century Crofts, Inc.
- Barth, J. (1958). *The End of the Road*. Doubleday & Company, Inc.
- Barth, J. (1984) The Literature of Exhaustion in Barth’s *The Friday Book: Essays and Other Nonfiction* (pp. 62-76). The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Barth, J. (1994). *Once Upon a Time: A floating opera*. Little, Brown Company Limited.
- Bowen, Z. (1999). Setting the Mobius Strip Straight: John Barth’s *Once Upon a Time: A Floating Opera*. *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 40, 195-202.
- Doležel, L. (1999). Fictional and Historical Narrative: Meeting the Postmodernist Challenge in David Herman’s *Narratologies: New Perspectives on Narrative Analysis* (pp. 247-273). Ohio State University Press.
- Harris, C. B. (1994). Review of *Once Upon a Time: A Floating Opera*. *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 14, 203-204.
- Hornby, S. A. (2009). *Oxford Advanced Learner’s English-Chinese Dictionary* (7th ed.). The Commercial Press and Oxford University Press.
- Marie-Laure, R. (1997). Postmodernism and the Doctrine of Panfictionality. *Narrative*, 5, 165-187.
- Richardson, B. (2006). *Unnatural Voices: Extreme Narration in Modern and Contemporary Fiction*. Ohio State University Press.
- Richardson, B. (2015). *Unnatural Narrative: Theory, History and Practice*. Ohio State University Press.
- Shang, B. (2015). On Unnatural Narratology. *Foreign Literature*, 2, 95-111.
- Song, M. (2011). The Innovation of Narrative Techniques in *Once Upon a Time* by John Barth. *Foreign Languages and Their Teaching*, 4, 88-91.