

| Rafał Modzelewski

MANY WORLDS, MANY IDEAS:
PHILOSOPHICAL AND IDEOLOGICAL
CONCEPTS IN SELECTED SHORT STORIES
BY TED CHIANG

The following paper provides analysis and perspective on Ted Chiang's short fantasy and science fiction stories. The research question that it aims at addressing is whether the secondary worlds in Ted Chiang's fiction function as vehicles for engaging and critiquing religious and philosophical ideas. In addition, is this engagement limited to overt, surface level philosophical discussion? The second question is relevant because, as is usually the case in speculative fiction, Chiang himself often cites philosophy, sociology, linguistics, and religion as major sources of inspiration. Therefore, it might be useful to examine his works beyond authorial intent, in a search for more ideologies than are explicitly stated.

In all cases, a combined approach method of identifying ideology in narratives has been utilised. This paper relies on Jameson's¹ and Eagleton's² works, as well as on sociological, historical, and philosophical approaches to identifying ideological concepts. This is due to the fact that this paper aims at presenting an overview of chosen works, and one methodological approach would have been insufficient.

¹ F. Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Durham: Duke UP, 1991.

² T. Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 1983.

Ted Chiang (Chiang Feng-nan) was born in 1967 in Port Jefferson, New York. He considers himself to be an “occasional writer” due to the fact that writing is neither his main occupation nor his main source of income. This is why he cannot be considered a prolific writer, with only 15 short stories and novellas to his name. However, he is certainly a celebrated writer whose work has earned him 4 Nebula and 3 Hugo awards, among other literary achievements. Before discussing works of Chiang selected for this analysis, it might be beneficial to provide an introductory insight into his works and the themes that run through them.

“Seventy-Two Letters” by Chiang retells the mythical story of Golem, an automaton either brought to life or destroyed by language³. In Chiang’s reiteration, the story does not take place in 16th century Prague, but in 19th century England. The mystical is, therefore, put in the context of an early capitalist economy, wherein means and processes of production clash with humanitarian concerns, and the aforementioned mysticism is slowly but inevitably replaced by enlightenment reason and know-how.

“Story of Your Life” is an exploration of the strong version of the Sapir-Whorf⁴ hypothesis through the mathematical lens of Fermat’s principle of least time. Here, Dr. Louise Banks, through studying an alien language, not only gains insight into her relationships with other people, but also into the workings of free will and time perception. In a sense, language does not function as a mere tool for representing reality. Language actively shapes Louise’s relationships and interpersonal reality.

Finally, “What’s Expected of Us” is short story that depicts a world strikingly similar to the contemporary United States, with one exception – the strong position of philosophical determinism is demonstrably accurate, and the psychological effects of the internalization of this realization are a common condition. When a device accurately and precisely predicting a single future event is used, those who have tried doing so are rendered inert and incapable of pursuing even the most basic goals.

The goal of Chiang’s work is to signal the philosophical and literary diversity of the author. In the following section a detailed analysis of three additional stories by Ted Chiang will be presented. His texts might be read and

³ H. A. Glaser and S. Rossbach, *The Artificial Human: A Tragical History*, Frankfurt Am Main: Peter Lang, 2011.

⁴ P. Kay and W. Kempton, *What Is the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis?* Berkeley: Cognitive Science Program, Institute of Cognitive Studies, U of California at Berkeley, 1983.

contextualized in a multitude of ways. For example, Fan⁵ suggests considering Chiang's work through a postracial lens. Nevertheless, due to the fact that his fiction is generally overlooked in academic considerations, the following analysis will be focused on a rudimentary interpretation of the ideological and theological notions present within the narrative, and in the structures and working of the secondary worlds envisioned by Chiang in three of his stories: "Hell is the Absence of God", "The Lifecycle of Software Objects", and "Tower of Babylon".

An infusion of theologies into one world

"Hell is the Absence of God" is a short story set in modern-day United States, and while the exact time is not specified, an approximate setting might be inferred from several clues in the text. Chiang has made several changes to the ontological dimension of this world in relation to our primary world. The God of the Old Testament demonstrably exists, and this is a crucial distinction from other potential deities that could have been meant by the term "God". Christ is never referred to, yet elements of Christian or gospel mythology, and more noticeably Old Testament motifs, such as prophets, miracles, and God intervening in human lives are clearly present. In this world there are no atheists or agnostics, only religious and non-religious people, as it is impossible to deny the existence of the supernatural element. However, it is possible not to worship it. Angel sightings occur regularly, yet they are not benign. In fact, Neil Fisk, the main protagonist and viewpoint character, loses his wife in a devastating angel sighting. Moreover, predestination, as a theological concept, is accurate, although that is not immediately apparent.

The aesthetic of the story bears a striking resemblance to Jonathan Edwards's *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*⁶ sermon as the focus on unrelenting justice, and God's wrath far outweighs the notions of redemption or love. Indeed, God in Chiang's story is far removed from the modern-day popular perception of a loving, merciful entity. When the protagonist's wife died, hit by a shard of glass broken during an angel sighting, she is known to have entered heaven. Neil, however, is non-religious, and therefore he expects

⁵ C. Fan, *Melancholy Transcendence: Ted Chiang and Asian American Postracial Form*, "Post45", May 2014.

⁶ J. Edwards, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*, 1741.

to be sent to hell. Hell is not a place of torment and suffering, as in Catholic theology. It is, as the title suggests, a state of existence with no access to God. For Neil, a lack of divine presence is not a motivating factor. What motivates him to trespass into Heaven is the desire not to be separated from his wife, even though he does not simply lose faith but develops an active hatred towards God. Despite this hatred, Neil is desperate to find a way of transgressing into Heaven. He is, as many people in the story are, under the impression that witnessing angelic light will grant him access to heaven, as it did for all who saw it in the past. Neil is, therefore, certain that Catholic theology on free will and salvation through deeds constitutes the rule under which the world operates. He is proven wrong when, after months of trying, he manages to encounter an angel, see its light, is killed by it, and is sent to hell nevertheless. The story not only infuses Protestant and Catholic theology, it also questions whether knowing God and knowing of God coincides with knowing God's Will.

What is more, the very epistemological basis of knowing the divine is put into question. Knowing is not based on faith, but on observation and the formulation of a hypothesis on the properties of beings – a particular element of the scientific method, instead of faith, is being utilized to know the unknowable, the supernatural, for something that the scientific method has no use. In the end, the scientific method appears to be of no utility indeed, and fails to facilitate the knowing of the divine. Finally, "Hell is the Absence of God" could be read as a retelling of the book of Job – itself an anti-ideological text as it challenges the notion of divine causality of suffering and evil⁷. Here, Neil, like Job, suffers immensely, despite being a righteous man. Unlike Job, he is not rewarded in the end, but additionally punished, regardless of his determination, devotion, and deeds. Another character, Janice Reilly, allows us to witness a different reversal of the biblical tale. She suffers by losing her legs in spite of being an upright person. Her suffering, unlike Job's, allows her to build a career as a motivational speaker, and when, by a miraculous occurrence, her legs are restored (like Job's wealth and family), she despairs as her career and, therefore, her life's purpose perish.

"Hell is the Absence of God" is an apt discussion on theology, ontology, and epistemology due to its secondary world, which provides sufficient context for it. It would be a reductionist mistake to read "Hell is The Absence of God"

⁷ S. Žižek and F. Wilhelm Joseph Von Schelling, *The Abyss of Freedom*, in: *The Abyss of Freedom*, Ann Arbor, Mich.: U of Michigan, 1997.

as a purely anti-theological text as it engages theology on its own terms, however subversive it might be.

A digital personhood

The second text selected for this interpretative analysis is “The Lifecycle of Software Objects” which features a parocosm set in the near future United States. While the plot revolves around technologies such as rudimentary strong Artificial Intelligence or accessible cyberspace, all technological developments present in this story are extrapolations of technology existing in reality. For example, spaces of social interaction in cyberspace already exist (for example, a virtual reality space known as *Second Life*), in Chiang’s story, they are far more immersive and directed at virtual reality to a greater extent than the existing solutions. The aforementioned strong AI is not only under development, but it is also capable of developing itself. At first, its capabilities are on a par with and similar to those of great apes, and therefore are being trained by animal handlers. Ana Alvareda is one of those handlers, and becomes the viewpoint character in a plot spanning 20 years.

The text opens with Ana being hired to handle and train the digents – newly developed digital beings, so that they can be sold and treated as pets. In order to achieve that, she, and other trainers, have to operate in a cybernetic environment via avatars. The mechanics of this solution resembles the workings of *Second Life*. However, it is much more immersive and based on perceptual virtual reality. In a certain sense, the trainers have to enter another, foreign space in order to meaningfully interact with the digents. During training, it becomes readily apparent that these entities possess learning abilities far greater than those of household pets, and display a wide range of character traits and personalities. Training soon becomes education and handling becomes upbringing. Thus, in addition to being a tale about AI development, “The Lifecycle of Software Objects” becomes an analogy for parenthood, an exploration of parental angst. Is the programming I am providing for my metaphorical child adequate? Will it prepare him/her for the realities of life? These are questions that haunt numerous characters throughout the story.

In addition, despite several similarities, Digents are markedly different from human beings, and therefore, despite developing a significant level of

intelligence, linguistic skills, and above all, self-awareness, will and should they be endowed with the same rights as those of human beings? Chiang describes the process of digents gaining legal personhood in a manner strikingly similar to past civil rights movements. However, a reading suggesting that it might be analogous to the current status of non-human persons might be even more satisfying. The ongoing debate on the status of such beings has resulted in, among other developments, a recognition of certain rights of whales and great apes in the state of California, and Chiang's commentary provides a relevant perspective on this issue.

The same digents that gain, or at least aim at getting, true personhood are, let us not forget, corporate products and, therefore, not dissimilar to *tamagotchi* toys. They provide companionship and, in a certain sense, require attention, yet only in the sense that a mechanical toy requires attention, otherwise its battery runs out. This is obviously not a point of view shared by Ana and other caregivers. Regardless, according to law, digents are of the same nature as physical property, code, or other forms of intellectual property. Similarly to "Seventy-Two Letters", capitalist notions of ownership are applied to clearly thinking and feeling beings. Unlike in Karel Čapek's *R.U.R.*⁸ where androids are owned and harnessed as means of production. Digents are products themselves, who in an act of irony, to become persons, have to assume the identity of legal corporations – the very institutions that brought them to life.

Finally, just as the human trainers need to enter cyberspace in avatars via virtual reality terminals, digents finally enter the physical world while inhabiting robotic bodies. To them, our reality is just as confusing, new, and foreign as a completely digital world is for human beings. They have to inhabit awkward avatars to navigate a world of limitation and danger. In this instance, the text challenges the ontological perception of space as physical. Similarly to William Gibson's *Neuromancer*⁹, cyberspace is treated as a space existing in reality¹⁰. In "The Lifecycle of Software Objects", a reversal occurs, and both cyberspace and the mundane world are simultaneously treated as physical and foreign. Still, it would have been disingenuous to talk about digents visiting the physical world only in terms of reversing human visits into their world. In science fiction tropes, people who venture into cyberspace frequently detach from the primary world and its limitations, with the virtual interface replacing

⁸ K. Čapek, *R.U.R. (Rossum's Universal Robots)*, Studio City, CA: Players, 1921.

⁹ W. Gibson, *Neuromancer*, New York: ACE, 1984.

¹⁰ E. James, *Science Fiction in the Twentieth Century*, Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994.

the senses. Additionally, a Cartesian mind-body dichotomy is even invoked, as those who enter the virtual world reject the physical and feel contempt for the flesh¹¹. Digents do no such thing. Indeed they are confused, yet with no point of reference the physical is not tempting. Ultimately, they, like Gibson's console jockeys, choose the virtual world, but not out of spite or disillusion.

Biblical cosmology and the economics of theocracy

The final text selected for analysis in this paper is "Tower of Babylon". While set in a consistent universe on planet Earth, it revolves around two non-scientific premises. First, that the Babylonians have almost completed the biblical Tower of Babel, their goal being, in accordance with the biblical myth, to reach the heavens. Second, that the geocentric model of the universe is accurate. Not only that, it also requires that the heavens are an actual, tangible place where a human being might set foot.

The plot of the story is centred around Hillalum, a young copper miner from the city of Elam. Hillalum, along with a group of miners and stonemasons, receives an order to travel to Babylon in order to climb the gargantuan tower constructed to breach the Vault of Heaven. Even as they approach the city they feel awe and amazement when looking at the tremendous tower. As the miners begin their ascent, they learn about the lives of the workers building the structure. Because climbing the tower from bottom to top takes several months, a large number of people need to live their lives along the way. During his ascent, the protagonist witnesses the daily activities of the tower dwellers, their struggle for drinkable water and usable soil on which to grow vegetables. It is that point in the story which could indicate a certain antipathy between the periphery and the centre – a vast capital city pulling resources from the rest of the land in order to accomplish the preposterous task of building a tower able to reach the heavens. Despite their arrival in the city being greeted with cheers and applause, the miners regard performing work in this place to be "unnatural", which is an ethical judgement on the task at hand.

Additionally, Hillalum is baffled by the tower dwellers' priorities, changing with the height at which they live. For instance, he learns that while a builder

¹¹ M. M. Leś, *Cyberspace and Senses*, "Białostockie Studia Literaturoznawcze", 2014: 215-29.

accidentally falling down the tower is regarded as a tragedy, it is not the worst that could happen on the tower. Should a bricklayer drop his trowel, he dooms himself and his family to months of starvation, as he cannot perform work and has to wait for a new tool to be transported from the bottom of the tower. Such a builder needs to go into debt and greets the fall of a fellow builder as a relief as he can pick up the dead man's trowel and perform work again. Hillalum is appalled by this logic and says:

That cannot be true. Why not have spare trowels brought up? Their weight would be nothing against all the bricks that go up there. And surely the loss of a man means a serious delay, unless they have an extra man at the top who is skilled at bricklaying. Without such a man, they must wait for another one to climb from the bottom¹².

The bricklayers laugh and confirm their story to be a joke at Hillalum's expense, and yet this way of thinking is neither foreign nor unprecedented in the economic domain. While Hillalum's insight might be regarded as sensible or humane, it is not the bricklayers' story, but their laughter that seems disingenuous. The economic dynamics of their story resemble the situation of a new class of workers in a neoliberal capitalist economy as described by Guy Standing. The Precariat, as Standing defines it, is a state in which workers lack not only the control of the means of production, but also basic economic predictability of employment.¹³ Precarious existence, lack of welfare security, and an enforcement by credit, where the means of production are more important than human well-being seem to indicate that Chiang draws our attention to the economic conditions of Western countries at the beginning of the 21st century, rather than the predicament of ancient workers. On the other hand, a certain echo of the myth of Sisyphus can be heard within the description of workers' lives. Like Sisyphus, the brick-pullers on the tower need to continuously ascend and descend portions of the structure to provide the bricklayers with material. This motif is later reincorporated, when Hillalum, after having reached the top of the tower, finds himself far away from it and needs to repeat his journey once more.

¹² T. Chiang, "Tower of Babylon", in: *Stories of Your Life and Others*, London: Tor, 2005, p. 7.

¹³ G. Standing, *The Precariat: the New Dangerous Class*, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011.

Finally, Babylon in Chiang's paracosm is a clear example of a theocratic political system. The vast resources required for the construction of the gargantuan tower are pulled out of every corner of the world. The goal of using these resources is not to improve social welfare, or even to conscript ferocious armies. The goal is purely theological – to breach the vault of heaven, and is based on a faulty, from a scientific point of view, interpretation of cosmology. In the middle of the ascent the scientific perspective seems to reign supreme. During the sunset, a line of darkness rushing up the tower at a tremendous speed makes Hillalum finally visualize the fact that night-time is, in fact, the shadow cast by the Earth. Despite this realization, the geocentric model of the universe holds true for Chiang's paracosm, and the unnamed theocracy that decided to reach the heavens is legitimate in its claims. Eventually, after a disastrous flooding, Hillalum is the only one to breach the vault of heaven completely. Instead of the divine realm, he emerges in the profane – somewhere on Earth, from where it is possible to reach Babylon again to tell its inhabitants about his discovery. The ultimate irony is that a theocratic society, motivated by non-scientific thinking, reveals a profoundly materialistic truth about the world.

Streszczenie

Science fiction jako gatunek literacki ma długą i bogatą tradycję konstruowania i dekonstruowania fantastycznych miejsc, światów i rzeczywistości. Ted Chiang jest amerykańskim autorem chińskiego pochodzenia. Jest on autorem uznanym, choć zaniebdanym z akademickiego punktu widzenia, piszącym krótkie formy literackie, które obfitują w wykreowane światy. Chiang kontynuuje i wychodzi poza postmodernistyczna tradycję Nowej Fali dzięki konceptualizacji światów, które polegają na lub rzucają wyzwanie kartezjańskiej myśli filozoficznej. Niniejszy artykuł skupia się na wybranych utworach, a jego celem jest pokazanie jak Chiang krytykuje lub wspiera idee naukowe, lingwistyczne i teologiczne w skonstruowanych przez siebie światach.