

The magic of cinema:  
fate and free will in  
"stranger than fiction"



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The medium of film has no limits, showcasing engaging characters, captivating story, and being able to manipulate an audience's emotions towards a specific theme explored, to the point that us as an audience are aware of the manipulation in the film. This is seen in Marc Forster's 'Stranger Than Fiction', where he incorporates language and film techniques in the film to engage and manipulate the audience's emotions towards the key theme of fate or free will. In the opening scene, we are introduced to a "story about a man named Harold Crick, and his wristwatch", through narration, confirming that the protagonist, Harold, is within a narrative, unknowingly a part of a chain of events, thereby establishing his character as a symbol of fate.

The motif of duty and routine, as symbolized by Harold's wristwatch, is introduced through a close-up, with the watch sitting on Harold's bedside table. "Every weekday, for twelve years, Harold would brush each of his thirty-two teeth, seventy-six times", conveys Harold's life as being ruled by routine, and manipulates us as an audience to feel sympathetic towards his character. The depiction of an uneventful life through his importance of numbers is conveyed through an over-the-shoulder shot, where we see he is browsing a magazine on calculators, and the use of digital and mathematical imagery showing patterns, mathematics, ratios etc. This shows Harold's thinking process, and manipulates the audience to feel discouraged about his life ruled by numbers, routine, and fate. Finally, Harold is revealed to, "live a life of solitude. He would walk home alone, he would eat alone, and at precisely eleven-thirteen PM every night, Harold would go to bed alone." This again manipulates the audience to feel sympathy for Harold, having been

introduced as a symbol of fate with no real purpose in life besides his job, numbers and routine.

The opposite of Harold, and fate, is introduced in a following scene as Ana Pascal, who is presented as a symbol of free will through her charitable and independent nature, being socially aware, and most importantly her occupation as a baker, with her baking and cookies being a symbol for love. In her introduction, she is being audited by Harold, failing to pay her taxes because of personal beliefs, and immediately both characters are represented as polar opposites. Her aggressive nature towards Harold is shown through her angrily shouting, "Taxman", showing her disgust towards government and hierarchy. Her rebellious views towards tax, and the amount spent on military, are clear when she states, "I didn't steal from the government; I just didn't pay you entirely." Harold argues that she can't "not pay your taxes", but Ana simply responds, "Yes, I can." Her views are most powerfully expressed when Harold asks whether she is part of an anarchist group, with her asking, "Anarchists have a group? Do they assemble? Wouldn't that completely defeat the purpose." This use of dialogue, rhetorical question and irony compares the government to an anarchist group, and shows Ana's personal views. Forster's characterisation of Ana immediately manipulates the audience to be fond of her due to her independent, fun and friendly personality, while being able to connect with the general audience in regards to her social views, and manipulates the audience to be supportive of free will.

Following introducing the symbols of fate and free will, Forster experiments by showing both working cohesively, which is seen when Harold makes a <https://assignbuster.com/the-magic-of-cinema-fate-and-free-will-in-stranger-than-fiction/>

move on Ana, due to his growing feelings towards her. Forster uses the romantic film cliché ironically, with Harold professing he brought Ana, “Flours. I brought you flours.” This clever play on words creates a beautiful moment shared between the two, manipulating the audience to feel supportive of the characters. Forster’s choice of using silence in the background, mid-shots, two-person mid-shots, pairing angles and slow editing helps depict the scene as very intimate. When Ana states that there’s rules against a possible relationship, Harold tells her that he “ doesn’t care”, “ because I want you.” Forster’s use of techniques and dialogue manipulates the audience into supporting the relationship, feeling emotions of awe, romance, and warm satisfaction, while also connecting to the key theme of fate or free will, with Forster ultimately manipulating the audience into supporting his idea that fate and free will can work together.

In the climax, rather than presenting his concept of fate or free will physically through symbolism, Forster presents them philosophically. He uses pairing, cross-cutting editing and narration to show Ana waking up, Karen writing the protagonist’s final fate, and Harold walking towards the bus stop, while Karen’s voice informs us of Harold’s last living moments as they play out. This manipulates the audience into feeling worried for Harold, due to the building suspense, and makes the audience expect Harold’s fate to come true. The motif of the watch, symbolising duty and routine, returns in this scene through the use of a quick close-up, with Harold using it to shield himself from the impact of the bus. The key part of this scene occurs when the boy on the bike falls onto the street, with Harold sacrificing himself to save him, thereby accepting his fate. When Harold accepts his fate,

however, he immediately makes his own decision, and thus exercises free will, due to Harold knowing his fate prior to it occurring. With this, Forster shows to us that it is eventually his watch, but more importantly, free will and fate, that saves Harold, manipulating the audience to accept that fate and free will work together, as without one or the other, Harold would not have survived.

The true wonder of cinema is being able to control an audience's emotions and mood towards characters, key themes and social issues, which is exercised by Forster in the specific sequences from 'Stranger Than Fiction.' Forster's idea of fate or free will is cleverly explored in particular through symbolism of Harold and Ana, and it is through their characterisation that the audience are manipulated to support them, as well as the key theme. Forster has expressed his clear and wondrous ideas on fate and free will in the film, and shows how simple it is to manipulate an audience's emotions, to the point that we are personally aware of it, and accept without hesitation.