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# “We’re here, and we don’t know why”:

An analysis of the postmodernist rejection of a universal meaning to life in  
Ken Grimwood’s novel *Replay*

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### Abstract

The question of the meaning of life is at the centre of this study without being directly addressed. The study does not analyse the meaning of life but rather how the main characters of the novel *Replay* (Jeff and Pamela) approach the question. This study argues that the novel *Replay* by Ken Grimwood presents a postmodern rejection of a universal meaning to life by making use of the literary device time loop and various other postmodern literary strategies. Although this study is one of the first to analyse the novel the study is not the first to analyse postmodern ways of viewing truth and meaning or existential questions such as the meaning of life. The study draws on earlier research to situate the reader in the context of postmodern literary analysis and to analyse the material. The theoretical framework for the analysis is provided by Lyotard’s definition of postmodernism and grand narratives. The analysis shows how the main characters’ experience of trying to understand why they are stuck in a time loop can be connected to the experience of every person trying to understand why they are here on earth. The time loop represents repetition, which is a prominent ingredient in *Replay*. Jeff and Pamela’s repeated rejections of various grand narratives, such as religion and, science and rationality, are what constitute the postmodern rejection of a universal meaning to life.

**Keywords:** *Replay*, Ken Grimwood, Postmodernism, Time-travel, Time loop

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## 1. Introduction

The search for the answer to the question of the meaning of life unites most humans. For some, it is a simple question to answer and for others the question seems to have no answer. By letting fictional character ponder questions such as these, literature forces the reader into also confronting them (Felski 25). Exploration of existential questions can often be found within postmodern works of literature, since they oftentimes deal with themes related to truth, human nature, and the self (Ray xiii). This study comprises an analysis of Ken Grimwood's *Replay*, which is a postmodern novel that explores its characters' perceptions of the purpose of our existence. It is argued in this study that *Replay* presents a postmodern understanding of the meaning of life and that the novel rejects the notion of universal truths through the use of postmodern literary strategies.

One of the most common postmodern literary strategies is repetition (Aylesworth), which is a prominent ingredient in *Replay*, since it is a work of time loop fiction. Time loop fiction is a sub-genre of time-travel fiction where the time-travel is looped, i.e., the characters repeatedly reexperience a portion of time. Works within this genre often offer a direct focus on questions regarding the purpose of life (Khaleel(M.A.) 92; Lyden 1). Although time loop fiction is a popular genre and *Replay* serves as a precursor to other popular time loop works of fiction such as *Groundhog Day* and *Edge of Tomorrow*, little published previous research on the novel is available. The present study adds to the limited discourse on time loop fiction and to the already existing discussion of the postmodernist understanding of the meaning of life.

Lyotard's definition of postmodernism, as described in *The Postmodern Condition*, provides the theoretical framework for this analysis of *Replay*. Through it, we can label the thought, or belief, that there is a universal purpose to be found in life, a grand narrative. According to Lyotard, a narrative is a story that seeks to explain and legitimize knowledge (Sarup 135), whereas a grand narrative is a narrative that helps to explain and legitimize other narratives and put them into perspective (Geyh 3). If there is a universal purpose to life, this means that there is a goal to strive towards and that striving towards, or achieving, that goal is what offers purpose to the human existence. This analysis seeks to show that through the use of the time loop, the novel *Replay* illustrates that there is no universal meaning to be found in life.

## 2. Background

The background is formatted according to the following structure. Firstly, postmodernism, which acts as the theoretical framework for this analysis, is introduced as a concept and a literary genre, and then follows a brief account of existentialism. Secondly, the use of time-travel as a literary device is discussed, and lastly *Replay* is connected to both postmodernism and time-travel.

One of the leading theorists of postmodernism, Lyotard, provides the following definition of the term in the introduction to *The Postmodern Condition*: “[s]implifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity towards metanarratives [Grand narratives]” (xxiv). Grand narratives are narratives that seek to explain all other narratives by appealing to universal truths (Geyh 3). In other words, these narratives offer a lens to view the world through that impact how other narratives are interpreted. Classic examples of grand narratives include religion and science, since a belief in them affects one’s perception of other narratives. The grand narratives which are analysed in this study are those that are shown to fail to provide the characters with a universal meaning to life.

According to Lyotard, then, a scepticism towards universal truths is at the core of postmodernism. However, it is important to note that a scepticism towards something is not the same as a strict dismissal of it. The postmodern scepticism is directed towards the universality of truth, not the ideas expressed within, or through, grand narratives. What postmodernists argue is that these narratives are not the one and only truth. According to postmodernism, there could exist many different truths (Sim 281-2). That which is true in one context may not be true in another. Truth is subjective and contextual (Lovile 105). Therefore, grand narratives, which claim universal application, should be avoided. Instead, a blend of local narratives which do not claim universal application should be adopted as a way of addressing the subjectivity and contextuality of truth and meaning (Barry 83). For example, rationality is useful in many situations, but all things are not rational (Gasché 535) and therefore rationality cannot explain all things.

There is a paradox inherent in the postmodernist incredulity towards grand narratives, as pointed out by Habermas. He argues that the founding idea of postmodernism is paradoxical, since it also serves as a grand narrative (210, 286). Habermas’ argument is that if grand narratives are narratives that explain other narratives, then postmodernism is a grand narrative, since it offers a way in which to address all other narratives. In a sense, the postmodern

argument against universal truths can be described as the paradoxical argument that the universal truth is that there are no universal truths.

Another definition of the term postmodernism, provided in *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, helps to connect the overarching concept of postmodernism to postmodern literature. Postmodernism is here described as “a set of critical, strategic and rhetorical practices employing concepts such as difference, repetition, the trace, the simulacrum, and hyperreality to destabilize other concepts such as presence, identity, historical progress, epistemic certainty, and the univocity of meaning” (Aylesworth). This definition addresses some of the established strategies of postmodernism, also mentioned by Fedosova, which can be connected to the use of the time loop in *Replay*, such as rejection of strict rules of a plot construction, fragmentation, hybrid of genres, intertextuality, citations and playing with time (Fedosova 79). When connecting Aylesworth’s definition of postmodernism to the strategies mentioned by Fedosova, we can see that the most critical part of Aylesworth’s definition in the context of this study is the challenging of the univocity of meaning through the medium of repetition. These parts of the definition are closely connected to the thesis statement, using the time loop (repetition) to illustrate that there is no universal meaning to life.

Since this analysis of *Replay* focuses on the existential question of the meaning of life, and Albert Camus is referenced in the novel, a brief mention of existentialism is warranted. According to Flynn, one of the basic themes of existentialism is the focus “on the human individual’s pursuit of identity and meaning” (Flynn 20). In *Replay*, Jeff describes the dilemma he and Pamela are experiencing as being effectively no different than that experienced by every person (Grimwood 141). Their experiences can be seen as heightened versions of every person’s encounter with “overwhelming forces that threaten to destroy individuality and eliminate meaning”, discussed by Coleman (691) as parts of what it is to be human. For example, all humans must come to terms with the passage of time and the fact that everything is not permanent. Jeff and Pamela’s experience can be described as a heightened version of this that leads both Jeff (Grimwood 84, 90, 132, 233) and Pamela (Grimwood 130, 132, 233) to show signs of a special sort of chronophobia, where the desirability of sources of potential happiness cannot be disconnected from the undesirable fact that they will be lost (Hägglund 450).

The chronophobia is one of the effects of the use of the time loop in the novel, which leads us to a discussion of time-travel as a literary device. Worth noting before delving into the discussion is that *Replay* belongs to a sub-genre within time-travel fiction, namely time loop

fiction. Time loop fiction is a variant of time travel fiction where the time-travel is looped. As a result, the character, or characters, reexperience a portion of time, oftentimes more than once. The saved state of a videogame could serve as a metaphor to explain this concept. When the reset button is pushed, or you run out of time or die (in the game), you return to the saved state, where you must start again, retaining knowledge of your previous attempts.

There is little previous research available on the novel *Replay*. The only article devoted to the novel was published in 2012 (Louet). In this article *Replay* is examined together with the film *Groundhog Day* and the short story “The Tunnel Under the World” with a focus on the role that repetition plays in the disenchantment of the utopia described in these works of fiction. Because of the lack of research on the novel, the following discussion focuses on research conducted on the use of time-travel as a literary device.

As a literary device, time-travel is often used in science fiction (SF). Therefore, most of the studies and discussions related to the subject take place within the context of SF. Although *Replay* does not neatly fit into the category of SF, the novel openly addresses the relation between time-travel and SF. The main focalizer, Jeff, activates his knowledge of SF as a framework to try to understand the situation that he has found himself in on several occasions (Grimwood 16, 24, 56).

Time-travel as a literary device is used for various purposes. Many uses of time-travel can be connected to the postmodern literature strategies accounted for earlier (Fedosova 79). One of the ways in which time-travel is used is as a way of playing with the concepts of time and causality (Wittenberg 28). Additionally, it is used to challenge the distinction made between story and discourse used in narratological analysis (Pratt 67). A simplistic description of the concepts of story and discourse would be that the story is the content of the novel and the discourse its form. Wittenberg states that time-travel fiction complicates this view, since “the “classical” mechanisms of temporal discontinuity, dilation, or reordering are now introduced directly into the story itself, in the guise of literary devices or mechanisms” (Wittenberg 6). In other words, in time-travel fiction, the content (story) of the work of fiction cannot be separated from the form (discourse). For example, the story of *Replay* is that of a man experiencing a time loop, and the author has written the story with the use of the literary device time loop. The time loop in *Replay* is both part of the story and the structure of the narration.

As stated by Frenzel (1), time-travel as a literary device also offers a way of commenting on societal conditions and often does so by confronting the possibility of a utopia. Both Alber

(170-1) and Gomel (37) mention this in relation to Wells' *The Time Machine*. In the novel, the main character travels to the future and finds that society has collapsed as a result of segregation, which is interpreted as critique of the class system representative of the time when the novel was written.

In addition to commenting on societal conditions, time-travel fiction is also used to offer reflection on existential questions such as the purpose of life and how to find meaning in it (Khaleel(M.A) 92; Lyden 1; Ray xiii). Lyden (1) argues that the use of the time loop offers an especially potent way in which to address questions regarding the meaning of life because of the questions that experiencing a time loop raises and the inevitable reflection that it forces upon the reader/watcher, as also mentioned by Felski (25).

Since *Replay* makes use of many of the strategies mentioned by Fedosova, the novel may be labelled as a postmodern work of fiction. For instance, the novel is difficult to place within a single genre. This difficulty is highlighted by the fact that the novel is listed both in *The Ultimate Guide to Science Fiction* (302) and *Modern Fantasy: The Hundred Best Novels* (260), both authored by David Pringle. In fact, in his description of the novel, Pringle states that “[n]o one has produced a time fantasy quite like this one before” (260). The difficulty stems from the hybridity of genres that follows from using literary devices and themes often connected to SF without observing the usual structure of that genre.

The use of the time loop in *Replay* creates a temporal distortion that makes the narrative chronological but non-linear. In *Replay*, Jeff is the main focalizer and it is his journey through time that the readers experience. Jeff's mind follows a chronological order, but his body does not. When Jeff dies, he wakes up in his younger body. For him, time has restarted. The only exception is that he has retained his knowledge and experiences from the earlier loops. This use of the time loop mixes and plays with the concepts of past, present and future.

*Replay* does not only play with the concept of cause and effect in the context of the story world, but also within the genre of time-travel fiction. In *Groundhog Day*, one of the most famous works of time loop fiction, the main character escapes the loop by learning a moral value (Lyden 2-3) In *Replay*, on the other hand, the lessons that the characters learn are not the cause of their escape from the loop. Instead, a reason for the loop is never given, and the lessons are realised upon having exited the loop, not while remaining in it.



### 3. Analysis

*Replay* tells the story of Jeff, who is trapped in an unhappy marriage and a job that does not excite him anymore. The story starts in 1988 with Jeff dying of a heart attack. He then wakes up in 1963, back in his young body again in his dorm room at Emory university in Georgia. Jeff is offered a chance to relive his life with knowledge about the coming twenty-five years. When Jeff again arrives at the same date and time in 1988, he suffers another heart attack and once again wakes up in 1963. Jeff has become stuck in a time loop, the experience of which is mentally strenuous for him. The story takes a turn when a film Jeff has never heard of becomes a box office hit. Jeff believes this to be a sign that there must be another person experiencing the loop out there. The person responsible for the film is Pamela, who is indeed another person experiencing the time loop. Their meeting serves as the starting point for a joint search for the purpose of the time loop and, ultimately, life.

The analysis is structured around examining the failure of the grand narratives present in the novel to provide Jeff and Pamela with a universal meaning to life. The grand narratives applied by Jeff and Pamela are analysed separately, each serving as focus areas of the analysis.

The analysis focuses on parts of the novel where Jeff and Pamela either explicitly express that there is no universal meaning to be found in life or implicitly express this by showing how the grand narratives fail to provide them with satisfactory meaning. As Jeff is the main focalizer, i.e., the character whose perspective the story is told through, most of the analysis is centred around his thoughts, since they are what the readers are privy to.

The time loop activates the search for the purpose of life through the use of different grand narratives by giving the characters the chance to relive their lives repeatedly. Through the use of repetition as manifested in the time loop, the novel shows Jeff and Pamela approaching life in different ways, with different intentions, and never finding satisfaction.

What is argued for in the study is what Jeff and Pamela express in relation to the meaning of life, i.e., to live happily (Grimwood 62). It could therefore be argued that what they believe will provide them with happy lives is that which they believe fills their lives with meaning and purpose.

For the sake of clarity, it is worth noting that *replay* is not only the title of the novel but also a term used by Jeff and Pamela to refer to the experience of the time loop. Jeff and Pamela refer to their various loops as replays and their first existence, before they experienced the loop, as their original, or real, lives.

### 3.1. Religion

Throughout the novel, Jeff and Pamela try to use their knowledge of different religions to understand what is happening to them and why. Most of the references to religion in the novel are to Hinduism and an unspecified God.

The first instance of Hinduism as a reference to their experience is when Jeff, in a drug-induced hallucination, is described as seeing himself as “the wheel [...] the cycle” (Grimwood 106). This is a reference to the Hindu concept of Samsara, the rebirth and the cyclicity of life, which is often depicted as a wheel. This thought is not developed further, but the comparison is made through the hallucinogenic metaphor produced by Jeff’s subconscious. Later Pamela explicitly mentions Hinduism in reference to their experience through a quotation of an unspecified English translation of the Bhagavad Gita:

‘ “You and I, Arujna,” ‘ she quoted easily, ‘ “have lived many lives, I remember them all: You do not remember” ‘ [...] Sometimes I think *our* experience is what they were talking about: not reincarnation over a linear time scale, but little chunks of the entire world’s history repeated over and over again. (Grimwood 123)

This quote is preceded by Jeff telling Pamela that he has read the Bhagavad Gita “[a] long long, time ago” (Grimwood 123), which could explain his earlier hallucination, where he subconsciously made the comparison between Samsara and his experience before he had consciously processed it. However, it can also be the case that Jeff did not consciously make the comparison because he did not believe in it. Jeff does not seem inclined to believe the religious explanation provided by Pamela (Grimwood 123). Pamela, on the other hand, seems inclined to believe, or hope, that their experience can be explained by Hinduism (Grimwood 133-4). Thus, the verse from the Bhagavad Gita is used as a framework for understanding her experience. Pamela’s experience resembles what is expressed in the verse but does not mirror it. As she mentions, the typical interpretation is that reincarnation is linear, whereas their replays are not. Also, the use of Samsara as a framework is beneficial to them both, since inherent in the concept of Samsara is the possibility of exiting the cycle of reincarnation by achieving Nirvana.

Pamela expresses the belief that Hinduism offers them a way out of the loop by referencing another verse from the Bhagavad Gita:

The recollected mind is awake

In the knowing of the Atman

Which is dark night to the ignorant:

The ignorant are awake in their sense-life

Which they think is daylight:

To the seer it is darkness. (Grimwood 133)

Her belief is that they will achieve Nirvana if they are able to wake the minds of those who are ignorant of the true way in which the universe operates. Providing humanity with such an explanation is the same as admitting that there is a grand narrative that explains all the uncertainties of life and the universe. Pamela, nevertheless, loses faith in Hinduism being *the* grand narrative after Jeff rejects the idea and her plan to wake the minds of those who are ignorant fails. Consequently, she tells Jeff, “I thought I’d found the only possible explanation for what was happening to me – to the world. I believed I was doing the right thing. ‘Well, I still don’t know. Maybe I was, maybe I wasn’t; it’s a moot point now.’” (Grimwood 138). Hinduism seemed to have all the answers she was in need of, but inevitably it failed to live up to the expectations of providing the answers to all of the questions of life. From this point on, Pamela no longer entertains the idea of Hinduism being the grand narrative that she is searching for. She does not abandon the thought because she is certain that Hinduism does not hold the answers she is looking for, but because she is certain that *she* will not be able find them through it. Evidently, Pamela has at this stage not yet rejected the idea of there being a grand narrative that can explain all but rejects the possibility of Hinduism providing *her* with the answers. By going from seeing meaning as an objective truth that is to be applied equally to all of humanity to expressing that there could be subjectivity to meaning, she expresses a postmodern pluralistic view (Sim 281-2) of the concept.

Jeff’s use of Hinduism as a framework for understanding differs from that of Pamela. Jeff does not seem to actively and willingly be using Hindu beliefs as a grand narrative until he, in one of his replays, starts replaying earlier than Pamela. At the first moment of Jeff making contact with Pamela before she starts replaying, he is not aware that the Pamela he knows is not yet there:

Pamela remained an unfamiliar child, ignorant of who and what she – they – had previously been. Perhaps her notions of eastern religion had been correct, in a manner unfathomable to either of them. Maybe she had attained complete enlightenment in her

last existence, and her soul or essence or whatever had gone on to some form of Nirvana.  
(Grimwood 163)

Pamela's mind is not yet in the body that he encounters. Instead, there is Pamela as she was the first time she lived her life. This happens because the length of their replays is exponentially decreasing. The first few times they start their replays, they do not notice the skew, as they call this shift in when they start their replays, since the shift in time is barely noticeable. However, since the skew is exponential, there comes a time when they start their replays months, years, and eventually decades later. Their skews are not identical, which results in Jeff starting replaying before Pamela. In the above quote, the narrator shows us that Jeff is using Hinduism as a grand narrative; an idea that can explain all other ideas. At this point, what Jeff thought he knew about the time loop is challenged and he tries to make sense of it by referring to his knowledge of "eastern religion". He experiences something new and reverts to a framework to make sense of it. The grand narrative dictates how he understands and experiences the world. If Jeff would not have met the replaying Pamela again, the teachings of "eastern religion" could have come to shape his existence.

When Jeff references God in relation to his experience, it is an unspecified God. Nevertheless, it can be inferred that he is referring to the God of Christianity and/or Judaism, based on a reference to a psalm. In one of his later replays, Jeff writes a book that he gives the title *Harpes Upon the Willows* (Grimwood 230). For one, this ties the aforementioned God to Christianity or Judaism, since it is an allusion to psalm 137. For the other, this is an example of Jeff using religion as a grand narrative. In using this title, he compares his experience of captivity in time to that of the Israelites' captivity in Babylon.

Another mention of an unspecified God comes when Jeff dismisses Pamela's notions of religion as an explanation for their experience: "[t]his whole experience has made me agree more with Camus: If there is a God, I despise him" (Grimwood 133). This is a reference to the postmodernist and existentialist philosopher and writer Albert Camus' novel *The Plague*. The novel is famous for exploring the 'Epicurean Paradox' or 'Problem of Evil', which states that God cannot be both omnipotent and good. If God is good, God is not omnipotent, since evil exists. If God is omnipotent, God is not good, since God allows evil to exist. Jeff believes his experience to be proof of this theory, since he feels that being stuck in the time loop brings him more hurt than any pleasure can measure up to. Questioning the omnipotence and good intentions of God serves as an explicit challenging of the grand narrative of not just Christianity but of most religions.

### 3.2. Science and rationality

Jeff lived and grew up in the United States of the mid-1900s. He was 24 years old when man first landed on the moon in 1969 and deemed the moon landing such an important part of human history that he decided to travel to Cape Canaveral to witness the launch (Grimwood 226). Jeff is portrayed as being a man of rationality, as seen in his difficulty comprehending that his mind is actually transported back in time (Grimwood 11), his rebuke of Pamela's religious explanation (Grimwood 123) and his first explanation when surviving the heart attack as being related to the enigmatic functions of the brain (Grimwood 268). Because of this, it is not surprising that he, on many occasions, turns to science and rationality to try to make sense of his experience. Nevertheless, his experience also makes him question the validity of science and rationality. Jeff is cast back and forth between believing in science and rationality and questioning whether they truly hold the answers to the questions that he feels he needs answered. Despite this, until the very end, Jeff seems to constantly revert to science and rationality in trying to explain his and Pamela's experience.

Jeff's rational view of the world leads him to believe that there must be an explanation for what is happening to him and why. This is made apparent when it is described that engaging in betting takes his mind of the "hopeless quagmire of metaphysics and philosophy in which the answers to his situation lay buried" (Grimwood 39). According to the quote, Jeff does not, at this stage, dispute that there are answers as to what is happening, and why. Nevertheless, it is acknowledged that, at this point, the answers seem desperately far away. Thereby, it can be argued that Jeff believes that the knowledge he possesses is not enough to explain his predicament, but that there exists knowledge that would help him understand both the what and the why of it all.

When Jeff and Pamela become aware of the skew, i.e., the differences in when they start replaying, they infer that there must be a rationality to it and that said rationality could be transferred to the language of mathematics. As a result, they express the belief that if they could calculate the differences in time for when they started their various replays, they could calculate the curve of the skew (Grimwood 174). Their eagerness to do this could be interpreted not only as representing them wanting to know when they are going to be starting their replays, but also as representing their eagerness to rationalise their experience. This serves as an illustration of their belief that if there is a rationality to the skew, there must be a rational explanation as to

why they are experiencing the time loop. In finding an answer to one, they feel they would be closer to an answer to the other.

In their search they go as far as to reveal their experience to the world in the hope that this will bring them attention from people who might help them explain their experience (Grimwood 201). This connects to the point earlier made, that Jeff believes that there is an answer that evades him because of his limited knowledge of science. Jeff is shown as being able to withstand the cynical and demeaning thoughts and comments of those who do not believe their experience “so long as other minds, perceptive and persistent scientific minds, continued to focus on the phenomenon” (Grimwood 215), which articulates the strength of Jeff’s belief in science being able to provide them with the answers they seek.

Science, however, does not provide them with answers more precise than those they have already been able to provide themselves. Because of the failure to provide them with answers, science and rationality are cast aside. Jeff comes to describe their search for a rational explanation for their predicament as a “futile quests for nonexistent answers” (Grimwood 255). By labelling their search as such, he sides with postmodernists in believing that all things are not rational (Gasché 535). If all things are not rational, rationality does not hold all the answers. The importance of challenging the grand narratives of science and rationality is supported by the fact that Lyotard makes a point out of directly addressing science, claiming that “[s]cience has always been in conflict with narratives. Judged by the yardstick of science, the majority of them prove to be fables” (xxiii). The most integral part of this quote is: “[j]udged by the yardstick of science”, since science legitimises itself by appealing to the grand narratives of reason and continual positive progression. Postmodernists such as Lyotard see this way of using science as oppressive. Scientific knowledge serves to disprove other narratives but cannot itself be disproven by means other than science, since it derives its legitimisation from rationality, and what is rational is seen as right and true.

Jeff shows a scepticism towards the grand narratives not by fully disavowing science and rationality but by adopting the postmodernist view that questions and their answers are subjective and contextual (Lovile 105). The textual evidence shows Jeff starting to believe that science does not hold the answers to all questions for all people in all contexts.

### 3.3. Fiction

Fiction as a grand narrative is handled differently than the other grand narratives within the novel. In the case of religion, as well as science and rationality, the postmodern message is conveyed through Jeff and Pamela trying to apply the grand narratives but eventually finding that these cannot give them the answers that they seek. Apparently, a single-minded reliance on such grand narratives cannot provide neither purpose nor meaning. Fiction, on the other hand, is on various occasions used to show Jeff's understanding of what would not be a relevant explanation. For example, the narrator says about Jeff: "He'd read a fair amount of science fiction as an adolescent, but his current situation bore no resemblance to any of the time-travel scenarios he'd ever encountered" (Grimwood 16). Here we can see that fiction as a framework is instantly disregarded, as it does not hold all the answers. Jeff's thoughts show that although his previous knowledge of fiction provides him with some understanding of what might be happening to him, it does not provide him with the whole truth.

The references to fiction serve a dual purpose; firstly, as a recognition of the local narratives, i.e., narratives that can be applied in certain contexts and do not claim to be universally applicable. Secondly, they serve as a way of showing the hybridity of genres evident in the novel, which displays literary devices often connected to the SF genre, such as the time loop, but have Jeff state that his experiences cannot be defined by the genre, since they are unlike any experiences the genre has ever covered (Grimwood 16). In this way, the novel either positions itself outside the genre of SF or as unique within it. Because the novel does not stay true to the conventions of SF by not offering any scientific or technical explanations, it could be argued that it drifts into the realm of fantasy as made evident by Pringle including the novel in both *Modern Fantasy* (260) and *The Ultimate Guide to Science Fiction* (302).

When describing the novel, Pringle states that "[n]o one has produced a time fantasy quite like this one before" (260). The hybridity of genres is what makes it impossible for Jeff to explain his experiences with the help of his knowledge of the genre. When Jeff and Pamela experience something new, they try to explain it using their prior knowledge. Since this is how they make sense of the world, grand narratives play an integral part in their way of experiencing it, which leads us to one of the postmodernist arguments for applying local narratives instead of grand narratives. Experiences and our perception of them are unique; they are subjective and contextual. Two people experiencing something similar may arrive at different interpretations of the experience. This can be illustrated by Jeff and Pamela's conflicting views of the purpose of the loop and their roles as replayers when they first discuss the subject (Grimwood 133).

Additionally, persons may also arrive at different interpretations of an experience based on the context. In *Replay*, this is made evident by Jeff's ways of approaching life in the different replays. If experiences and their associated perceptions are subjective and contextual, it would not make sense to presume the existence of a grand narrative that can be applied to them all.

The novel also positions itself as outside the genre of SF or as unique within it by implying that the time-travel depicted in the novel does not produce any paradoxes, which are often an essential part of time-travel fiction (Gomel 17; Pier 168). In *Replay* there are no paradoxes, as the mode of time travel does not offer any obvious paradoxes.

Did he really have to worry about paradoxes, the old killing-your-own-grandfather idea? That might not be an appropriate concern at all. He wasn't an outsider wandering around in this time, afraid of encountering himself at an earlier age; he actually *was* that younger self, part and parcel of the fabric of this world. Only his mind was of the future – and the future existed only in his mind. (Grimwood 24)

Since Jeff has not been transported physically to the past and has no way of traveling back to the future, the world of the future is no longer of any concern. In stories where the character is physically transported back in time, there also remains a more certain sense of past, present, and future. In *Replay*, however, where only the mind travels back in time, the concepts of past, present and future become increasingly subjective and contextual. In this sense, the way in which the novel positions itself in relation to SF also conveys a postmodernist view of truth (Lovile 105).

In a further comment on Jeff's experience in connection to SF, it is restated that Jeff does not believe that what he is experiencing can be compared to SF. When Jeff thinks about John F. Kennedy and the possibility of saving him, he is shown as thinking that "the fantasy was irresistible, outlandish and even clichéd though it might be. But it was no television drama, no science-fiction plot; Jeff was here" (Grimwood 56). Just as when he questions the applicability of his knowledge of SF (Grimwood 16) Jeff, as evidenced in the above quote, rejects the role that fiction could play in his understanding of what is happening to him. However, this quote can also be seen as associated with the concept of local narratives, since in other instances, Jeff is shown as using fiction to further his understanding of the world and the universe. As shown in the earlier discussion of the topic of religion as a grand narrative, Jeff's understanding of God is shaped by Camus' novel *The Plague*. The novel has helped him form an understanding of what God is or is not (Grimwood 133). In showing that the character's understanding is



formed by novels that he has read, *Replay* illustrates how novels have the potential to change a person's understanding of the world. Thereby, the novel comments on its own possibility of affecting the reader's perception of the world through this metacommentary, consequently strengthening the argument that there is no universal meaning to life, since it is inferred that novels can affect readers' perceptions of the world.

### 3.4. Material wealth and personal pleasures

Jeff has a split view of his experience of the replays, as evidenced by his feelings of both captivity and freedom. Jeff feels captured and as though the replaying makes his life devoid of meaning, since nothing he can do is everlasting (Grimwood 79-80). At the same time, he expresses much optimism about reliving his life (Grimwood 54-5), since the replays give him another chance at doing things the right way and create a life filled with more meaning. This is noticeable in the first of Jeff's many replays, where the narrator gives us direct insight into Jeff's thoughts as he acquires wealth through betting. Because of him being able to eliminate this hindrance for a better life, he expresses an optimism about the future and is, in the moment, not haunted by the loneliness and futility that the experience of the loop causes him to feel: "[t]he betting had given Jeff a new sense of purpose, distracted him from the hopeless quagmire of metaphysics and philosophy in which the answers to his situation lay buried" (Grimwood 39). In his original life, Jeff often struggled economically and was barely able to make ends meet (54). The lack of wealth was a contributing factor to the deterioration of the relationship between him and his wife (242). Therefore, Jeff feels a new sense of meaning in acquiring wealth. By earning money betting, he can make sure that the obstacle of not having money will not stand in the way of him living a happy life.

The attempt, and failure, to prevent the assassination of John F. Kennedy serves as the catalyst for Jeff starting to question the impact that the changes he can make to his life can really have for him:

All the hopes he had of rebuilding his life with advantage of foreknowledge ... were they doomed to be mere superficial changes, quantitative but not qualitative? Would his attempts at achieving general happiness be as inexplicably thwarted as his intervention in the Kennedy affair? (Grimwood 62)

Until the failed prevention of the assassination, Jeff is filled with optimism about the opportunities presented by reliving his life with a knowledge of future events. This incident,

however, changes it all. Jeff takes the failed attempt at preventing the assassination as a sign that he can make no significant changes to the future. As a result, he believes that he will stay unhappy, no matter what he does during his replays, since he was unhappy before experiencing the time loop. The purpose he previously found in the acquisition of wealth dissipates as he contemplates whether it will really impact his life. Earning money is instead described as filling a void and not providing any real meaning: “Jeff didn’t involve himself in much after that except making money [...] It was something to do” (Grimwood 63). Wealth, which he had sought as a solution to his unhappiness, now provides as little purpose as playing solitaire; it helps pass the time but offers no real satisfaction. Despite the fact that he has eliminated the obstacle of poverty he feels a “sense of hopelessness worse than any he had known since boarding school” (Grimwood 62). At this point he rejects the grand narrative of finding happiness and meaning through material wealth. After this, Jeff begins to wonder what other ways of finding happiness, and thereby meaning, in life there could be.

There are two main ways in which Jeff seeks to find happiness after this: in relations with women, and in starting a family. Regarding relations with women, Jeff quickly comes to realise that the way in which he interacts with women brings him physical pleasure but does not provide any real happiness:

He went out with a variety of women, slept with some of them, hated the whole meaningless process [...] he grew to despise the rigid formality of dating, missed the easy familiarity of simply *being* with someone sharing friendly silences and unforced laughter. (Grimwood 66)

This is the moment in which Jeff for the first time seems to realise that pleasure and happiness, although often conflated, are not synonymous. Although he can enjoy all the pleasures of life, he cannot find happiness. Much of the reason that Jeff cannot find happiness through his relations with women is that he is “seeking a woman whose experience would match his own. But of course that was an impossible goal” (Grimwood 86). Jeff seems to be searching for happiness *through* the women he meets, not *with* the women he meets. This is also the case when he decides to marry a woman he does not particularly like for convenience and hopes that having a child might strengthen their relationship (Grimwood 72-3).

The child does not solve the problems of their relationship, but she provides Jeff with both happiness and a purpose to his otherwise miserable life. The child, Gretchen, is described as the “source and object of all the deep affection he could encompass or imagine” (Grimwood

74). Gretchen brings him happiness and becomes the meaning of his life. Becoming a father seems to give meaning to Jeff's life in a way that wealth and relations with women could not. When all this is eventually lost, when his life is once more reset, Jeff gives up. As a result of his experience of the time loop, Jeff shows signs of a special form of chronophobia mentioned by Hägglund; "[w]hatever is desirable cannot be dissociated from the undesirable fact that it will be lost" (450). Hence, the fear of loss causes Jeff to avoid happiness:

Jeff just didn't much give a shit after that. He'd done all he could, achieved everything a man could ever hope to – materially, romantically, paternally – and still it came to nothing, still he was left alone and powerless, with empty hands and heart. Back to the beginning; yet why begin at all, if his best efforts would inevitably prove futile? (Grimwood 95)

Wealth did not bring him happiness, neither did relations with women. The one thing that brings him true happiness is not everlasting. That which brings him unbridled joy is now that which brings him more grief than he has ever experienced. The conclusion is not that none of these things can bring about happiness, or that Jeff is wrong in pursuing any of these them. Instead, the conclusion is what is argued for throughout this essay; there is no universal meaning to life. In these instances, Jeff is once again shown as pursuing one thing at a time; first wealth, then women, then being a father. Never does he focus on more than one thing at once. Jeff has a singular aim in his search for happiness and is not yet open to viewing meaning as being pluralistic.

### 3.5. Plurality of meaning

Postmodernists would most likely not agree with the criticism raised by Habermas, who claims that the incredulity towards grand narratives is, in itself, a grand narrative (210, 286). Despite this, it is included as a heading in this analysis, since it serves as a way of summarising the postmodern viewpoint that Jeff expresses throughout the novel.

On the last pages of the novel Jeff expresses a postmodern view towards the meaning of life when he articulates that there is no single answer to the question of the meaning of life. On the contrary, the answer can be found in a plurality, rather than a universality, of meaning. When Jeff finally survives the heart attack that has functioned as the point of reset of time for him, he begins to think about the future and what it might hold for him. The narrator shows us the inner workings of Jeff's mind and provides us with the following insight into his thoughts:

The only thing that mattered was that the quarter century or so he had remaining would be *his* life, to live out as he chose and in his own best interests. Nothing took precedence over that: not work, not friendships, not relationships with women. Those were all components of his life, and valuable ones, but they did not define it or control it. That was up to him, and him alone. (Grimwood 271)

This trail of thought is overtly postmodern in that it expresses the belief that meaning is not universal; meaning is not something that we can be provided with. Meaning is many things, and a singular focus of one of the components of life does not provide us with sufficient meaning. The quotation also expresses a postmodern understanding of meaning as innately subjective, as well as the idea that there is no shared meaning and purpose for all of humanity (Lovile 105; Sim 281-2). Jeff comes to this way of viewing the world because of his experience of the time loop. Throughout his many lives, he tries to find the purpose of what is happening to him and also hopes to find an answer to how to live to find true happiness, although his search always ends in failure.

Before arriving at this conclusion, Jeff conveys a message that can be seen as similar to that of the cliché ‘carpe diem’: “[t]his wasn’t ‘next time,’ and there would be no more of that; there was only *this* time, [...] He would not waste, or take for granted, a single moment of it” (Grimwood 270). However, this can be argued to be an overly simplistic way of viewing the message conveyed. Instead, the quote can be interpreted as further criticism towards living life according to grand narratives. This interpretation is supported by viewing it in relation to Jeff’s rejection of the grand narratives (Grimwood 271) and the fact that when Jeff believes that he has seen Pamela for the last time, he is shown as thinking that “[t]hey had squandered far too much of the priceless time that had been granted them, wasted it on bitterness and guilt and futile quests for nonexistent answers” (Grimwood 255). The futile quest for nonexistent answer is the search for meaning or purpose through the grand narratives. During the experience of the time loop it seemed to Jeff as though time was unlimited. Together with Pamela, he spent the seemingly unlimited time trying to find answers to the question of the meaning of life through the use of the grand narratives. When seen in relation to this quote, and Jeff’s rejection of the grand narratives (Grimwood 271), Jeff stating that there is only this time and that this time should not be wasted can be interpreted as him articulating that he will no longer spend his time trying to find the universal meaning of life. Instead, he is satisfied with the realisation that there is no such answer and that meaning in life cannot be found in one single source. He is content with viewing meaning as pluralistic, subjective, and contextual.

Jeff and Pamela's search for an explanation of their experience can be seen as an allegory for the search for meaning in life that all of mankind is involved in. As one of many examples of self-referentiality in the novel, this is also explicitly expressed when Pamela tries to convince the, at this point, rather nihilistic Jeff that they should continue searching for an answer to their predicament, whereupon Jeff utters, "[o]ur dilemma, extraordinary though it is, is essentially no different than that faced by everyone who's ever walked this earth: We're here, and we don't know why" (Grimwood 141). This quote directly ties Jeff and Pamela's experience to those of the readers and works to strengthen the postmodern message of the novel, since it is explicitly stated that there is a connection between their experience and that of all mankind. This connection takes the story to another level. It is no longer simply about two people searching for an answer to a predicament they have found themselves in but is now a story about two people searching for the meaning of life.

The fact that the characters never receive any answers to why they experience the time loop is also of importance for conveying a postmodern view of truth and meaning. There is no certainty that there was a reason for them experiencing the time loop. Not providing the characters with an answer strengthens the argument that truth, and more importantly in this context, meaning, is subjective, pluralistic, and contextual. The realisation that Jeff comes to at the end of the novel is not expressed as a certain truth. It is the answer that Jeff arrives at because of his experience of the time loop; it is Jeff's truth.

#### 4. Conclusion

By following Jeff and Pamela on their search for answers to their dilemma, it was found that their journey could be seen as an allegory for the plight of most of the sentient beings on this earth. This study argues that Jeff and Pamela's search for an answer as to why they experience the time loop is transformed into a search for the meaning of life and that the time loop is what activates a search for the meaning of life. Ultimately, this study argues that this seemingly fruitless quest illustrates the postmodern notion that there is no universal answer to the question of the meaning of life. There could be said to be three main reasons as to why postmodernists do not believe there to be a universal meaning to life. The three reasons are that meaning is subjective, pluralistic, and contextual (Lovile 105; Sim 281-2). The argument that this study puts forth is supported by analysing the way in which Jeff and Pamela relate to grand narratives during their search for meaning.

As established, grand narratives are both a way of understanding the world and a way of finding meaning in it. This can be related to Jeff and Pamela's search for a meaning to the time loop. They express an eagerness to find a way of understanding the time loop (Grimwood 174), which can be connected to the belief that an understanding of it would bring them closer to understanding why they are experiencing it.

The characters' experience of the time loop entails repetition, which is a key factor in the novel. The effect of the repetition generated by the time loop is that the characters are offered the opportunity to live according to different grand narratives. This results in the rejection of living life according to a grand narrative occurring not just once but repeatedly. The study shows the rejections to be based on different strands of reasoning, but all are related to a postmodern view of truth and meaning as subjective, pluralistic, and contextual.

Worth restating here is that the rejection of the universality of the grand narratives is not a complete rejection of the ideas but merely the universal application of them. This is made evident in Pamela's rejection of religion as a grand narrative (Grimwood 138). When Pamela rejects Hinduism, it is not because she is certain that it does not hold all the answers but because she believes that *she* will not be able to find the answers through Hinduism. In other words, there may be truth to Hinduism, but it is not Pamela's truth. Similarly, science and rationality are rejected by Jeff (Grimwood 255), but Jeff does not abandon them. Instead, he applies the postmodern view of truth as plural and contextual (Lovile 105; Sim 281-2).

Another way in which the rejection of the universal application of a grand narrative is rejected is in relation to fiction. As mentioned, fiction is handled differently than religion, science and rationality. Jeff is shown to both disregard fiction as a way of understanding the universe (Grimwood 16, 56) and use it as such (Grimwood 133). By showing the readers ways in which fiction helps form Jeff's understanding of the universe, the novel also comments on its own possibility of forming the readers' understanding of the universe. Thus, both Jeff's disregard of and use of fiction as a grand narrative as well as the comment on the possibility of fiction to form the reader can be seen as comments on the subjectivity and contextuality of truth and meaning.

The analysis of Jeff's search for meaning through material wealth and personal pleasures points to the novel conveying that a single-minded focus on any grand narrative is doomed to fail. Jeff pursues things he thinks will bring him happiness, but pleasure does not entail happiness. The single-minded focus on these pleasures only leads to more despair and hurt (Grimwood 66, 95). Still, these experiences are what lead him to embrace a view of meaning as subjective, pluralistic, and contextual. The insight Jeff arrives at towards the end of the novel ties all previous rejections of grand narratives together and shows that these are not unrelated incidents (Grimwood 271). One rejection on its own does not provide much support for the argument, but when they are all added together, they serve to indicate that one of the most important messages conveyed by the novel *Replay* is that a universal answer to the question of life does not exist.

This study adds to the limited research available on *Replay* and to the larger field of research on the postmodern perspective on truth and meaning. Since there exists little research on *Replay*, it is a novel that is open to all forms of analysis. Because of the blend of strategies and genres, further analysis on the novel could yield interesting results. An analysis that focuses more on the narratological aspects of the novel than this study provides might, for example, be interesting to pursue.

As mentioned in the introduction, there are those who can answer the question of the meaning of life and those who cannot. For those who can, time-travel stories can test or cement their conviction. For those who cannot, delving into the world of time-travel stories which are replete with thoughts on and discussions about existential questions can be a way of addressing the fact that they are here, and they do not know why.

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