

Title: A study of border planes in adult Sci-fi “A Darker Shade of Magic” by V.E. Schwab.

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Abstract

In today's world, borders define geographical and temporal spaces ascribing forms of limits to territories. Recently, a new generation of theorists and critics has delved deeply into the study of borders. Consequently, Border studies emerged as an opposing viewpoint to the idea of a unified borderless world. This theory expands the scope of borders from geography and history to include various fields within the social sciences and global literary studies. Literature incorporates borders in several forms. Notably, Adult sci-fi novelists assiduously create borders to shape the narrative and amplify differences and similarities both explicitly and implicitly. Effectively, the extensive use of borders enriches the plot, however, it implies a complex meaning embedded in the levels affected by the established borders. This article attempts to examine “A Darker Shade of Magic” by V.E. Schwab through a Border theoretical lens in order to analyze the border planes closely. The observation of Schimanski and Wolfe’s five border planes: topographic, symbolic, temporal, epistemological, and textual borders in

the novel allows for a better understanding of the significance of borders and its role in the plot.

Key words: Border theory, border planes, adult sci-fi literature, territories, space, literary studies.

الملخص

في عالم اليوم، تبرز الحدود المساحات الجغرافية والزمنية التي تنسب أشكالاً من الحدود إلى الأقاليم. في الآونة الأخيرة، تعمق جيل جديد من المنظرين والنقاد في دراسة الحدود. وبالتالي، برزت دراسات الحدود كوجهة نظر معارضة لفكرة عالم موحد بلا حدود. توسع هذه النظرية نطاق الحدود من الجغرافيا والتاريخ لتشمل مجالات مختلفة في العلوم الاجتماعية والدراسات الأدبية العالمية. يدمج الأدب الحدود في عدة أشكال. وتجدر الإشارة إلى أن روائي أدب الخيال العلمي الناضج يجتهدون في خلق الحدود لتشكيل السرد وإبراز الاختلافات والتشابهات بشكل صريح وضمني على حد سواء. وعلى الرغم من أن الاستخدام المكثف للحدود يثري الحبكة الروائية، إلا أنه ينطوي على معنى معقد متضمن في المستويات المتأثرة بالحدود الموضوعية. يحاول هذا المقال دراسة رواية "ظل أعمق من السحر" لـ فيكتوريا إليزابيث شواب من خلال عدسة نظرية الحدود من أجل تحليل مستويات الحدود عن كثب. إن رصد مستويات الحدود الخمسة التي وضعها شيمانسكي وولف: الحدود الطوبوغرافية، والرمزية، والزمنية، والمعرفية، والنصية في الرواية، يسمح بفهم أفضل لدلالة الحدود ودورها في الحبكة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: نظرية الحدود، مستويات الحدود، أدب الخيال العلمي للبالغين، الأقاليم، الفضاءات، الدراسات الأدبية.

I. Introduction

For many years, borders were used in literature to connect and separate explicitly and implicitly. Most literary genres implement a variety of borders that draw the image closer to the minds of the readers and help them submerge into the plot. Oftentimes, the existence of spaces like worlds or realms, as well as borders such as portals that are either portrayed as connection or separation elements in sci-fi novels is noticeable. Borders set the reader's mind to make comparisons and draw differences and similarities, hence encouraging further engagement in the novel. In adult sci-fi, borders and the meaning behind them are radical in the understanding of the plot and building an image for the reader to visualize the events. In the 1990s, border studies regained prominence and gave rise to what is now recognized according to Newman and Paasi (1998) as a contemporary evolution of border theory. The resurgence of Border studies served as a counter-narrative to the rising notion of a borderless world (Newman, 2006). This revival highlighted the relevance of borders in the context of globalization and the expanding integration of information and communication technologies (ICTs) (Newman, 2006). Furthermore, Border studies were in the forefront due to geopolitical shifts, notably those originating in Europe such as the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the establishment of the European Union, as well as the recent developments in the US-Mexico borderlands. Borders have recently been investigated as complex structures, explored within the social context and through the interactions of diverse actor

networks. These networks involve various entities, including the state, local governments, private businesses, humanitarian organizations, and international entities (Rumford, 2012). Moreover, this renewed academic interest is situated within the broader global context marked by intensified migration movements (Lamont & Molnár, 2002). Borders encompass the migration of individuals between different locations, as efforts to regulate spaces through the establishment of borders give rise to circumstances characterized by profoundly imbalanced power dynamics (Schimanski & Wolfe, 2007). This emerging generation propelled borders into a meticulously researched theme, extending beyond the discipline of geography to encompass not only social sciences but also literary studies on a global scale. According to Johan Schimanski and Stephen Wolfe, the border frequently leads to unforeseeable or unconventional outcomes since it features a performative aspect in both its establishment and maintenance, functioning as either a practical action or an aesthetic act (Schimanski & Wolfe, 2007). Furthermore, the ambivalence associated with borders arises from their conceptualization as a dual-faceted construct: both a barrier and a connector (Schimanski & Wolfe, 2007). Moreover, it should be emphasized that the borders function as a barrier, contact and filter (Kurki, 2014). Subsequently, we're always positioned in relation to the border, and it's impossible to see the whole border from every side at once (Schimanski & Wolfe, 2007). Typically, if not invariably, border crossings evoke a moment conducive to storytelling or narration. The space traversed by characters and within which events unfold—the narrative space—serves as the location for encounters, border crossings, and cultural engagements (Friedman, 1999). In this regard, Borders can be divided into two discernible elements—visible and invisible—derived from the theoretical contributions of Michèle Lamont regarding social boundaries and Virág Molnár's conceptualization of symbolic boundaries (Lamont & Molnár, 2002). Although the use of borders in sci-fi is noticeable in many works; how does the use of borders in adult science fiction narratives contribute to narrative complexity and obscurity, and what underlying themes or messages do these borders conceal, requiring deeper analysis for interpretation? To examine this issue, We explore the border theme in a *Darker Shade of Magic* by Victoria Schwab from a border theoretical point of view. This study aims to reveal the border planes embedded in the narrative of the novel, and how they intertwine the events and contribute to the development of the characters and the storyline. Adult Sci-fi literature and border studies continue to evolve into increasingly dynamic and complex areas of research, nonetheless, it is possible to analyze and reflect upon adult sci fi literature using the concepts of border planes derived from border studies perspective. This analysis is crucial in the

understanding of border planes in adult sci fi and the border as a new trend in this genre.

II. Understanding border planes in the realm of border theory

In the interdisciplinary field of border studies, various academic disciplines are intertwined around shared notions concerning the attributes and functionalities of the borders subject to examination. Therefore, Border theory can contribute to an alternate reading and analysis of novels that through decades have been read by thousands of individual readers and critics. Border configurations have become important in fiction and autobiographical narratives discussing movement and cultural intersections. They play a pivotal role in understanding how various ideas about borders are exchanged across different discussions. In the examination of borders in literature, various border planes are identified, each conceptualizing fundamental aspects within border theory. Thus, border planes represent a foundational framework for a theoretical analysis of literature related to borders, aiming to bridge diverse theoretical approaches. The Implementation of border planes serves as an entry point into border theory, facilitating the distinction of borders present in literary texts (Johansen, 2018). In their *Border Poetics Delimited*, Schimanski and Wolfe (2007), argue that borders are connected based on borders that are embedded in the text. Simultaneously, the text itself serves as a bordered element that framed and defined. As a result, there are five border planes that stem from this concept that can function topographically, symbolically, temporally, epistemologically and textually. This methodological instrument allows for an interpretation on five levels of borders that are represented by certain elements in the text. The following section explains them in detail.

The topographic border is a representation of a space or place as it suggests a border on the topographic border plane. This space can be between different nations and other geographical divisions, but it can also be inside or outside your home or the body as a border. This place is distinguished among several geographical divisions including regions and nations, as well as a smaller scale of separation as in inside or outside one's body or house as a border. Notably, if the border represents a symbolic space, then it is perceived as a symbolic border.

Symbolic borders manifest in the form of metaphors and ideas, and they cannot be seen. They are usually represented in narratives as binary oppositions: such as young or old, male or female, good or evil. Hence, the symbolic border operates mentally and metaphorically (Schimanski & Wolfe, 2007).

Next, the temporal border is related to time as a border plane, and it is expressed as distinct temporal phases in the text. Oftentimes, it is shown as prominent life

events such as: death, divorce. The epistemological border functions based on the border plane between the known and the unknown, meaning knowledge. This is often used to insert elements of mystery, which helps submerge the reader in the narrative. Due to its binary nature where we have the juxtaposing notions of known and unknown, the epistemological border is also considered as a symbolic border.

Lastly, the text itself is considered as a border plane and represents a textual border. It is manifested in the writing of the text and division of parts. The structure of the text linguistically, stylistically, discursively, narratologically, and thematically is a fundamental criterion. Moreover, the segmentation of the text plays an important role in isolating or connecting the reader to the plot and the characters. Therefore, the text can function as a border (Schimanski, 2006).

III . Revealing the borders in “A Darker Shade of Magic”

The theme of borders recurred throughout the novel through five broad references that emerged from the analysis of the narrative. Schwab implements the topographic border in the three realms found in the story. Inevitably, those realms, namely: White London, Red London, and Black London, Grey London are separated. Despite holding the same name, the Londons represent three completely different worlds where the story unravels, and characters are crossing borders to move between them.

Throughout the narrative, it is clear that there is a topographic border between them. Schwab uses a set of elements including special words such as “As Travars”, as well as the garment of Kell, notably his coat as an element to further portray the existence of these topographical borders and allude to the process of border crossing. The geographic rupture between the three Londons is emphasized throughout the story, and it creates a clear idea in the mind of the reader that the similarities and differences between them revolve around the border that sets them apart. Schwab elaborated on the portals that allowed Antari, including the protagonist: Kell to travel across the worlds. “But to make a door within a world, both sides had to be marked by the same exact symbol. Close wasn’t close enough. Kell had learned that the hard way.” (Schwab, 2015. p, 17). Therefore, the topographic border plane is distinguished by the necessity of a portal, which serves in the crossing to the desired destination. Furthermore, the three Londons are also functional on the symbolic border plane since they represent the barriers between different power dynamics and societal ideologies, as well as the influence of magical powers.

The rhetoric of *A Darker Shade of Magic* has nuances of symbolic borders that complement the plot in its complex simulation of freedom/confinement

concept. This theme is notably present in the characters of Kell and Holland. These two opposite characters are integral in the story. There are several binaries that the reader draws from closer analysis of these characters. However, the binary of freedom and confinement constitutes the major difference between them and the rivalry that is presented in their encounters. The rarity of the Antari renders them a highly sought-after commodity. Both Antari feel dehumanized and objectified by the people in their environment. They also share the feeling of lack of trust even in their closest circle. This isolation causes a tremendous solitude that consumes them slowly and contributes to their decision-making process. Another point that they share is the identity crisis that they suffer from due to their obscure history and absence of family. Furthermore, both Antari seem to have a spiritual connection that allows them to sense how the other feels. In addition, the exploitation of their powers is involuntary be it directly or indirectly for Kell and Holland. Although not plainly disclosed in the book, it is clear that Kell and Holland are deeply linked to each other. Be it a blood link or a sense of familiarity that both hold for one another, it is demonstrated in the novel in their reaction to each other. This is a subliminal symbolic border that Schwab implemented in her plot. Kell and Holland live in completely different worlds, have radically distinct features, and morally disagree with each other; yet they are connected. The tangible borders of geographical regions, physical appearance, and ethical stances are limitations to this connection in its most simple definition. However, they are merely as powerful in the symbolic sense. Kell and Holland are bound together in the way even in their character development.

Despite belonging to the same species: Antari, Kell and Holland stand in complete opposite sides of the spectrum of freedom in the novel. On the one hand, the autonomy that Kell has is represented through his free movement between worlds and his detachment to crowns as a sign of his free will. On the other hand, Holland is imprisoned by the Danes and forced to obey their orders and plead allegiance to them as rulers of White London. This is explained as a result of a spell that rendered Holland a puppet in the hands of the Danes twins and stripped him of his free will. Conversely, the actions of Kell that spring from his purely self-made decisions contrast with Holland who is presented as an equal to Kell in power but unable to freely act on his own account as a result of his confinement by the Danes: Athos and Astrid. Despite pleading allegiance to the Maresh royal Family of Red London, Kell is not under any forceful manipulation that denies him the right to act. It is rather his loyalty to the family that he considers himself part of that keeps him on their side. The lenience towards the orders of the king and the queen is not simply that of a commoner following the orders of his leader, instead, it is of a son listening to his father and behaving according to the benefit

of his family. This is also proved in the brotherly relationship between Kell and Rhy.

Although Kell was depicted sometimes as the protector of Rhy and the true guardian that maintains the safety of the future king of Red London, Kell spends time with Rhy just as any siblings would. Kell also plays the role of a tutor to Rhy since he assists him in his magic reinforcement and control lessons. The conventional definition of a simple subject, characterized by an uncritical compliance with directives and a contented acceptance of whatever benefits are conferred by their sovereign, is markedly distinct from the nature of the relationship between Kell and the Maresh royal family. Unlike the archetypal subject, who passively adheres to the whims of their ruler without significant personal interruption or real opposition, Kell's relationship with the Maresh royal family is characterized by a more complex and nuanced interaction. This connection involves not merely passive acceptance, but an active and intricate interplay of influence, allegiance, and personal engagement that transcends the simplistic model of subjecthood. The depth and complexity of Kell's affection for the Maresh royal family highlight a departure from the traditional paradigm, reflecting a more sophisticated and layered understanding of family and loyalty. The actions of Kell, which come from his own independent choices, contrast sharply with those of Holland, who is portrayed as having equal power to Kell but is unable to act freely due to the control exerted over him by the Danes.

While Kell makes decisions based on his own judgment that may come from an emotional reaction or a personality trait, Holland's ability to act is significantly limited by the restrictions imposed by the Danes. This difference highlights how Kell operates with full physical and emotional freedom, whereas Holland is constrained and is unable to express his feelings and thoughts. Furthermore, colors are exploited to draw a line between common people and royalty. Choosing specifically the red color as a core element of their house symbols represents how their connection to Red London itself. Effectively, it is not a random choice, rather it is a strong message that connects them directly to the state itself, giving the impression that they are Red London and Red London is them. In Red London, the royals prefer to set barriers between them and the public as part of their traditions.

Another symbolic border is language. It signifies a border between the realms. Changes in accents and language are fundamental in the creation of separate worlds. Language is also presented as a barrier that sets the realms apart where each world has a special language with Arnesian as the common tongue in Red London. Language represents a cultural feature that unites and separates. It unites the Arnesians in Red London all while separating the ruling royal Maresh

family from the common people. On the one hand, in Red London it is a symbol of the upper-class society. On the other hand, it unites Red Londoner under one banner as a society. Clearly, language is also used to explicitly showcase the deep connection between Rhy, the royal prince, to his guards. Unlike the rest of the Royal family, Rhy speaks Arnesian fluently and he uses it to converse with his guards in their break time. The barrier of language is implemented to draw a clear image of Rhy as the humble prince who sincerely enjoys simple thrills. It also manifests his close connection to the culture of his people and how he feels like he is part of them, not just a distant ruler who lives in a lavish castle. This symbolic item is strong in the introduction of Rhy as a character and says a lot about him without necessarily dedicating an entire chapter for such a pivotal character in the novel. These differences create a clear distinction in the mind of the reader between the cultural aspects of the Londons and help them understand certain interactions between the characters by building expectations. The latter stems from the informative rhetoric that is provided to the reader throughout the novel as part of the integration of the reader in the worlds that Schwab created. The concept of visibility/invisibility is also found as Kell notices that the Naresk Vas is seemingly empty but feels the magic in it despite its invisibility. The fact that Kell was only able to sense the magic although he was unable to see it establishes a form of border that readers are able to distinguish in this adventure.

Another temporal border is the fall of Black London which is mentioned several times to refer to a period of time before the doors were closed and the one after it, which is the actual timeline of the narrated events. The timeline in *A Darker Shade of Magic* is explored chapter by chapter. It is also used as an element to trigger the curiosity of the reader and create a sense of mystery. The fall of Black London is referenced on several occasions throughout the story as the beginning of a new era. In addition, the closing of the doors is perceived as a border between two eras: before and after. Consequently, this border is distinguished in another part as well: “The fact they were all called London was its own mystery, though the prevailing theory was that one of the cities had taken the name long ago, before the doors were all sealed and the only things allowed through were letters between kings and queens” (Schwab, 2015. p, 15). This monumental event is a temporal border that Schwab chose to help the readers understand the history of the world that she created. It also serves as a solid reference as several other important events are not precisely chronologically ordered. Nonetheless, this is a fundamental part of the layout of the plot as chapters may spin in different eras.

A deeper analysis of the events indicates the existence of a strong temporal border in the text. The distinction of specific time periods is especially prominent in the historical trajectories of the realms. The three Londons stand for a certain timeline that can be discerned by studying its composition including the features and

specificities. For instance, White London refers to the industrial period with its ashy aesthetic and highly polluted air. The people are workers who are struggling to meet their family needs and life is cruel. Also, Grey London had the scent of smoke, which is typical for cities in the industrial period as factories businesses were booming and everyone worked in the industry. This contributed heavily to the air pollution crisis as the quality was declining at a rapid pace. However, Red London carried the smell of blood, which Kell referred to it as the smell of home. Kell relates the familiarity of the smell of blood since he uses his own to perform his spells in order to activate the magic.

Red London represents the romantic era. The meticulous description of Red London is a courtesy to the romantic age with soft details that carry the main features of this period. The reader is caught in awe of the beautiful nature of this world. For example, the implementation of the natural elements to describe it is mentioned as some smell the scent of tulips, Chrysanthemums, and Peonies as well as roses. This dreamy conceptualization of a world where colors and scents are heightened, and nature is a central element in its peak glory is typically found in Romanticism. The slow, steady pace of Red London resembles the perception of Romantics to the world in that period with a description that is rich in beauty and sophistication. The city is described as a lavish world where colors are accentuated and more prominent than the other cities, representing joy, hope, and most importantly life.

Furthermore, the impression of the royal traditions leads the reader into relating this to the Romantic era where royals had special colors reserved only for them as mentioned in the novel for the Maresh dynasty family members where red is the color of the Royal family. Grey London refers to our current timeline. The mundane, magicless world that runs in a flow of order that is similar to the real world. This sense of familiarity is endorsed by a main concept which is the existence of one world -the one we live in. Grey Londoners are mostly unaware of the existence of other worlds, and those who have an idea of other worlds are considered delusional or even unstable.

The epistemological border is the framework of the entire plot as it is based on the binary notions of known/unknown. It is purely related to knowledge and how it is presented or concealed. The novel depends fully on the element of mystery where the dichotomy of known/unknown moves the characters and impacts their development. Schwab constructed the entire plot on a series of mysteries that reader will be tempted to try to solve as Kell gets involved in one adventure after the other. The reader also ventures as characters like Lila and Holland. The mystery surrounding these characters is intrinsic in the plot structure. Furthermore, the distinction between what is known and what is

unknown- The evolving dynamics of knowledge, or its absence, adds layers of intrigue to the narrative, amplifying its complexity. Mainly, this is present in the presentation of the protagonist of the story: Kell. Schwab focused on the past life of Kell and the mystery behind the color of his eye which relies on the concept of mystery, all while carefully providing information that is directly or indirectly related to it.

Moreover, the absence of knowledge builds the tension that is carried through the story regarding the real identity of Kell and the reason why the royal family refuse to answer his concerns. Kell suffers from an identity crisis as a result of the scarce information he knows about himself and his original family. His unique physical appearance with a black eye that represents his magical powers sparks his curiosity as he wonders whether he was born with his gift, or it was acquired. In addition, Kell voices his concerns regarding his real parents as he wonders if he was abandoned by his family or taken away from them by force. Schwab exposes these questions and contrasts them with the firm rejection of providing information by the Maresh family; Thus, creating a sense of mystery and establishing an epistemological border based on the notion of knowledge and its absence.

The textual border is conveyed through the author's segmentation of scenes. *A Darker Shade of Magic* is written in an intriguing manner. On several occasions, Schwab opts for ending the scene without a finishing action, which leaves the reader unable to know what happened afterwards, creating more tension and adding to the thrill of the plot. Noticeably, in section 1 of chapter V, Lila and Barron witnessed the attack of the “street rats” on the boy that Lila helped previously. Throughout the book, Lila is describing as cutthroat and merciless, and a street rat herself by the way she steals even when people are being kind to her. However, this scene is integral in exposing the true moral compass of Lila through which she decides how to behave. Lila has a weak point for children who are in a vulnerable situation and who do not have family or protectors. Much like herself, she views them as victims of the social injustices in her world. By exposing this soft side of Lila, Schwab prepares the reader for a violent interaction, alluding that the reaction of Lila is to attack the bullies. However, the text itself does not express it. The reader is left with a cliffhanger at the end of the chapter. This border is created by the author herself and it separates the reader from the following part of the plot. At the same time, the next section tackles a different dimension in the story. This technique is used to build tension and maintain the interest of the reader as well. At the same time, this textual barrier blocks the reader from knowing the continuation of the actions of the characters, hence, the text itself serves as a textual border.

IV. Conclusion

Border crossing is a prevalent theme explored throughout V. E. Schwab's *Darker shade of magic*. The five border planes that are emphasized by Schimanski and Wolfe are prominent in several sections and display the topographic, symbolic, temporal, epistemological, and textual borders in the plot. These borders are beautifully woven into the fabric of the plot and may be seamless with skillful structural and rhetorical integration. The author implements a plethora of borders, literal and metaphoric, that add to the mystery of the plot and simultaneously carry the reader through the events by exploiting binary notions that help create tension and conflict resolution.

Borders represent a pillar in the construction of fiction plots. The integration of the five border planes is progressively becoming a central part of fiction writing and it is changing how the reader interacts with the novel continuously.

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