

## INTO THE DIMENSION OF EVIL IN *THE NETHER*, BY JENNIFER HALEY

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**ABSTRACT:** Jennifer Haley's *The Nether* (2013) is a play about how evil is commonplace in a society that the virtual reality took place of the real world. Jennifer Haley's netherworld is a world beyond the Internet, when it is already possible to live in an idealized but dystopian and hellish network, where virtual reality has reached heights never imagined before. Research organizations, cultural bodies, military institutes, libraries, and companies of all sizes moved into the Nether as to foster a so-called real life. This article aims to try to examine how a *police procedural* drama like *The Nether* (2013) explores questions of spectropolitics in a supposedly vacuum (not empty) space of a computer network that has descended, metaphorically, into the depths of hell looking towards contemporary life. Considering the works of Marvin Carlson, Peeren & Blanco, Lee Horsley, and others, I question what Horsley states: isn't it in contemporary American theater where we find this tendency to blur the line between 'fact' and 'fiction'?

**Keywords:** Spectropolitics. *The Nether*. Political theater.

## NA DIMENSÃO DO MAL EM *THE NETHER*, DE JENNIFER HALEY

**RESUMO:** *The Nether* (2013), de Jennifer Haley, é uma peça sobre como o mal é lugar comum em uma sociedade na qual a realidade virtual tomou o lugar do mundo real. O mundo inferior de Jennifer Haley é um mundo além da Internet, quando já é possível viver em uma rede idealizada, mas distópica e infernal, onde a realidade virtual atingiu patamares nunca antes imaginados. Organizações de pesquisa, órgãos culturais, institutos militares, bibliotecas e empresas de todos os portes se mudaram para o Nether a fim de promover uma suposta vida real. O objetivo deste artigo é tentar examinar como um drama de *police procedural* como *The Nether* explora questões de espectropolítica em um espaço supostamente vazio (não vazio) de uma rede de computadores que desceu, metaforicamente, às profundezas do inferno, olhando para a contemporaneidade. Considerando os trabalhos de Marvin Carlson, Peeren & Blanco, Lee Horsley dentre outros, questiono o que afirma Horsley: não é no teatro americano contemporâneo que encontramos essa tendência de borrar a linha entre “fato” e “ficção”?

**Palavras-chave:** Espectropolítica; *The Nether*; teatro político

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*Nether realm*

1. *Another world for mythical creatures*
2. *Demon world*
3. *A dimension of Evil or Imagination*

*urbandictionary.com*

*Dark, dark my light, and darker my desire.  
My soul, like some heat-maddened summer fly.  
Keeps buzzing at the sill. Which I is I?  
A fallen man, I climb out of my fear.  
The mind enters itself, and God the mind.  
And one is One, free in the tearing wind.*

*Theodore Roethke*

The *Urban Dictionary* defines nether realm as “a world for mythical creatures, a world of demons and a dimension of evil or imagination”. *Oxford Languages* defines the Internet as a “network of computers scattered all over the planet that exchange data and messages using a common protocol, uniting private users, research organizations, cultural bodies, military institutes, libraries and companies of all sizes”. Jennifer Haley's netherworld, in *The Nether* (2013), is a world beyond the Internet, when it is already possible to live in an idealized but dystopian and hellish network, where virtual reality has reached heights never imagined before.

Almost like the Internet, the Nether offers users an infinite number of realms in which to work, study or experience anything they want to explore - from killing a wild boar to having sex with an elf. The Nether has gone so far as to assert its role as a “contextual framework for being” (HALEY, 2013, p. 13), where “[e]ighty per cent of the population work in office realms, children attend school in educational realms” (HALEY, 2013, p. 17). The Hideaway, under police investigation, is notable for being “the most advanced realm there is when it comes to the art of sensation” (HALEY, 2013, p. 24), but also because it offers space for individuals with pedophilic tendencies to “realize” their fantasies. According to June Xuandung Pham:

What sets *The Nether* apart is its medium, which underscores the importance of embodiment in thinking about the ethics of virtual reality, reaffirming the relevance of theatre in the discussion of technology. Rather than writing a moral play, Haley chose to address pedophilia from a variety of angles. In so doing, she aimed for an ethical approach that resists closure and encourages critical thinking. A police procedural play, *The Nether* compels us to contemplate the future of legal practices in dealing with crimes that differ from what we know, starting with

a more thoughtful reflection on digital agents and a more open attitude to inhuman subjects (PHAM, 2018).

It is more than commonplace to say that both criticism and literary theory have always been concerned with moral discussions in their discourses and, in their wake, theatrical theory. My aim in this article is not to go against this ethical discussion on stage, but to try to examine how a *police procedural* drama like *The Nether* (2013) explores questions of spectropolitics in a supposedly vacuum (not empty) space of a computer network that has descended, metaphorically, into the depths of hell.

Marvin Carlson in *The Haunted Stages* (2003) states that every play is necessarily haunted. For him, all theater brings a spectral presence of those who return, not necessarily to stay, but as something that, instrumentally, drags the past towards the present and in this present remembers something that had already been. The ghostly function, throughout the history of literature, serves as a memory that cannot be forgotten. In the last essay of his book, “The Haunted House”, Carlson presents a very interesting debate between the concept of empty space for Peter Brook and Henri Lefebvre. The latter believes that the concept of the empty space is not real, he considers the empty space to be nothing more than “a form or container of a virtually neutral kind, designed simply to receive whatever is poured into it” and a “social morphology: it is to lived experience what form itself is to the living organism, and just as intimately bound up with function and structure.” (LAFEBVRE, 1991, p. 93, 94). In other words, for Lefebvre, social space is a social product. Therefore, if the empty space is a social product, in Carlson's conception, this empty space has never really been empty, it has always been a space haunted by the cultural memories of the past. For the City University of New York professor, “the empty spaces that have been utilized for centuries for theatrical events are particularly susceptible to semiotization, since they are almost invariably public, social spaces already layered with associations before they are used for theatrical performance” (CARLSON, 2003, p. 133). In other words, the memories that haunt these spectral places are perpetuated *ad infinitum* in the theater, especially when the stage changes space: from the physical to the virtual. The spectropolitics that overflows from Haley's netherworld is evident in its symbolism as the United States of America. It is important to remember that for the professor, there is a direct relationship between the past and the theater as a receptacle of memory. For him,

The close association of the theater with the evocation of the past, the histories and the legends of the culture uncannily restored to a mysterious half-life here, has made the theater in the minds of many the art most closely related to memory and the theater building itself a kind of memory machine (CARLSON, 2003, p. 142).

Carlson thinks about the relationship between the past and the theater through an evocation of the past. His choice of vocabulary takes me immediately to what is uncanny or unfamiliar, in Freud's words, but at the same time it gives us a certain comfort. The theater building itself brings us face to face with the ghost of our previous trips to the theater and how much we underestimated it. The building as a memory machine turns the country into a haunted house. The question now is to understand how this haunting changes from the physical to the virtual. Blanco and Peeren, in *The Spectralities Reader* (2013), see spectropolitics as a confusing concept, capable of evoking both frightening scenarios of dehumanization and dreams of revolution. Thus:

(...) spectropolitics emerges as the site of potential change, where ghosts, and especially the ability to haunt and the willingness to be haunted, to live with ghosts, can work, as Janice Radway argues in her foreword to Avery F. Gordon's *Ghostly Matters*, to "revivify our collective capacity to imagine a future radically other to the one ideologically charted out already by the militarized, patriarchal capitalism that has thrived heretofore on the practice of social erasure (BLANCO & PEEREN, 2013, p. 94).

However, it seems to me that there is an asseverative view of this spectrality, as the researchers say that the possibility of change marks their discourse. However, I believe that spectropolitics lies in the fusion between Blanco and Peeren's concept of a "dejà fusion" and the vision of a world doomed to failure, a world in which there is no hope; although there may be the possibility of a revolution, it will necessarily be a failed revolution. They seem to be the horrors of a social nightmare from which it is impossible to escape, from which their characters try to get out, but this supposedly failed revolution prevents them from escaping, so there is no change, no hope.

In the preface to the latest Brazilian translation of *Das Unheimliche*, a 1919 essay by Sigmund Freud, Gilson Iannini and Pedro Tavares write about the untranslatability of the German word. For the translators, "infamiliar" is the word in Portuguese that most expresses what is at stake in the concept developed by the psychoanalyst. "Infamiliar/unfamiliar" shows that the border

between languages is not insurmountable, but also that the passage from one language to another requires a certain amount of forcing. The concept of translation perhaps triggers another concept: the transposition of the passage from life to death, the possibility of crossing the border between the two worlds, that of the dead and that of the living. The concerns of death and about death are integrated into the idea of the familiar, something that also harbors its antithetical meaning. For the translators, “the *unheimliche* is a negation that overlaps with the *heimliche* apprehended both positively and negatively: it is therefore a reduplication of this negation, which accentuates its distressing and frightening character”<sup>2</sup> (FREUD, 2021, p. 11). The neologism in Portuguese does not exactly translate the German word, but it has both the positive meaning of something we know and recognize and the negative meaning of something we don't know. Something that is foreign to us and causes us anguish.

I argue, then, that spectropolitics in theater is the encounter between Blanco and Peeren's “frightening scenarios of dehumanization” in a distressing world devoid of hope, where there are no dreamscapes and time is disconnected - 'out of place' - (there is no history, event or promise of justice) with Sigmund Freud's concept of the 'unfamiliar'. The perplexity of Hamlet's father's ghost points to the fact that time is a lie. Time is 'out of place' suggests a sense of chaos, that the natural order of things has been disrupted and, therefore, the future is necessarily bleak, devoid of hope.

### Police Procedural in Haley's Netherworld

The Nether is a virtual wonderland that provides total sensory immersion. Simply log in, choose an identity and indulge your every desire. But when a young detective discovers a disturbing kind of entertainment, she unleashes an interrogation into the darkest corners of the imagination. In an interview with Concord Theatricals' You Tube program, *Samuel French Playwright Conversations*, Jeniffer Haley comments on her desire to write a drama that was a police procedural, but that brought up ethical issues that are possible in contemporary times. Ethical issues, especially when they involve children in a virtual world, raise questions of conscience in the real world, but is this rule also valid for a role-playing game? When an adult impersonates a child? The playwright draws our attention to the fact that:

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<sup>2</sup> The *unheimliche* is a negation that is superimposed on the *heimliche* apprehended both positively and negatively: it is therefore a reduplication of this negation, which accentuates its distressing and frightening character.

The play asks a lot of questions about the ethics of technology, sticky questions, we all assume that we are free as individuals, our imagination can go anywhere and we can't be prosecuted for that but when technology comes in to play it's not just you entering their imaginative world and acting out whatever desires you want to act out, but when you actually do that with the people, and you put your imagination together, what kind of ethics of a plurality of people doing these things even if it's only in their minds (SAMUEL FRENCH PLAYWRIGHT CONVERSATIONS, 2016).

The detective genre is not new in literature, crime literature saw its debut in the 19th century with Edgar Allan Poe and his detective C. Auguste Dupin in his 'tales of reasoning', however, when the detective meets the stage, the drama, it seems to me, develops in an even more visceral way. Peter Messent brings up the issue of crime fiction and how the policeman appears as a mediating figure between the authority of law (and the social order it upholds) and the emphasis on an individual sense of moral responsibility, social justice and freedom of expression. First, there is the policeman or policewoman who carries out their professional role without any doubts about the law and the justice it represents. Then there is the police officer, detective or FBI agent (usually one of the latter two) whose social values - often what we might call "progressive" - lead him or her to deeply question this system and/or whose independence and intelligence distance him or her from the wider police group of which he or she is a part. Messent also describes the *police procedural* as a certain narrative structure - with criminal act, detection and solution in an orderly sequence. He also assumes that significant attention will be paid to the ways in which police officers and departments do what they do, the 'procedural' material that constitutes the 'daily routines' of their lives. This material includes the representation of investigative processes, command and communication structures, the way knowledge is shared and the institutional resources used (MESSENT, 2010, p. 175). For him:

Much contemporary detective fiction, both private eye and police procedural, does underwrite the values of "the controlling agencies of modern society." But there are many writers who use these forms to explore the contradictions and tensions of contemporary existence, creating ... a "discontinuous" tradition that in a variety of ways has challenged normative thinking (MESSENT, 2010, p. 180).

Haley's play is a meandering police procedural and a haunting science fiction thriller that explores the consequences of living out our private dreams. Scaggs (2005) reminds us that the police procedural is structured around the police officer, considered a dominant Western symbol of social control. The police procedural works with its audience to diffuse the potential for violent transgression by foregrounding the police and the wider justice system and, in doing so, the procedural becomes, over the course of its development, one of the most effective means of policing a society governed not by morality, but by fear of scandal, fear of punishment and fear of its own capacity for criminal and amoral action.

Criminal and amoral actions are played out all the time on the contemporary American stage. Lee Horsley, in his essay “Serial Killers, pathologists, and police procedurals”, in *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction*, states that it is in the *serial killer* novel that this received wisdom<sup>3</sup> corresponds to the gothic tendency to blur the boundary between 'fact' and 'fiction' (2005, p. 140). I question much of what Horsley says: isn't it in contemporary American theater where we find this tendency to blur the line between 'fact' and 'fiction' more prominent?

### **The Nether World: The United States of America and the Hideaway**

*The Nether* premiered on March 19, 2013, at the Kirk Douglas Theatre in Los Angeles, where it was produced by the Center Theatre Group. Winner of the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize and nominated for many other important theatrical awards, the one-act play, divided into 17 scenes, is basically set in an interrogation room that could take place anywhere in the USA. There are few scene changes between the interrogation room and the Hideaway (already inside the Nether), where the conversations/interrogations between Morris (the investigating policewoman), Sims/Papa<sup>4</sup> (a successful businessman), Doyle (a middle-aged science teacher), Iris (a virtual girl, described as a *shining*<sup>5</sup> little girl in the character list) and Woodnut (a guest) take place.

<sup>3</sup> Profilers of actual serial killers, like Ressler and Thomas Shachtman, argue that the ‘typical’ motivational structure of the serial killer is founded on two basic themes, ‘the dominance of a fantasy life and a history of personal abuse’ (Simpson 2000: 128; Ressler and Shachtman 1997: 4) (see HORSLEY, 2005, p.140).

<sup>4</sup> We cannot ignore the reference to the online playing game The Sims. For more information see: [https://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Sims](https://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Sims).

<sup>5</sup> The reference to Stephen King's *The Shining* (1997) is real. Although Iris is a virtual character, she is the catalyst - and in some ways the victim - of the crime.



“Time Period: Soon” (HALEY, 2013, p. 2). Although the play is set in a near future, we can return to the question of the non-transposition of time, the unreality of time, the lie that time becomes. The brief future is nothing more than the possibility of a present that mirrors a disturbing past that haunts us. The unreality of time connects with life in the shadows, where it is possible to be anyone at any time. When questioned by Detective Morris, Sims makes the virtual world sound real when he says that the Nether is a “contextual structure for being” (HALEY, 2013, p. 13). Being and time are mixed up in a dangerous web of lies where what is tangible becomes irrelevant. For Heidegger, time is the instance on the basis of which we understand things and ourselves. The meaning of our being is determined by the way we project ourselves into time. In *Being and Time* (1927), the philosopher tries to think of time as a horizon for answering the question about the meaning of being and human existence. If the question is still one of human existence, in the Nether the question is reversed and becomes one of human non-existence. There is no human being, only a shadow of it.

MORRIS: Your realm is not only popular, but lucrative. It's afforded you two hundred square feet of real grass, surrounding your brownstone. A garden of snap peas and Swiss chard. Your wife's clothes are made of cotton. Why, with such in-world abundance, do you choose the life of a shade? [...]

So you've never considered crossing over? [...]

But really, Mr. Sims, an average of sixteen hours a day in the Nether? What can be gained by spending so much time in something that isn't real?

SIMS: Just because it's virtual doesn't mean it isn't real. Eighty percent of the population work in office realms, children attend school in educational realms. There's a realm for everything you want to know or do or think you might want to try. As the Nether becomes our contextual framework for being, don't you think it's a bit out of date to say it isn't real? (HALEY, 2013, p. 12-13)

It is in the first part of the interrogation between the detective (the figure of power) and Sims that we understand a little about the transposition of the real world into the virtual one, where you can be who you want to be, where the world is safer from perverted “sickos”. In Sims' words:

SIMS. Look, Detective, I am sick. I am sick and have always been sick and there is no cure. No amount of cognitive behavioral therapy or relapse deterrent or even chemical castration will sway me from my urges toward children. I am sick and no matter how much I loved him or her I would make my own child sick and I see this I see this — not all of us see this — but I have been cursed with both compulsion and insight. I have taken responsibility for my sickness. I am protecting my neighbor's children and my brother's children and the children I



won't allow myself to have, and the only way I can do this is because I've created a place where I can be my fucking self! (HALEY, 2013, p. 15)

It is interesting to note that in this safe world where there is no possibility of punishment for crime, human interaction loses its value, there are no more consequences, the empathetic need to understand who the other person is, is lost when you cannot understand that your action can hurt the other person, be extremely painful for them. There are no consequences to hurting another, physical sensations are inconsequential. The dead are reborn. For Doyle, the science teacher, physical sensation is not important:

DOYLE. Our bodies are ninety-nine percent space. **Physical sensation is inconsequential.**

MORRIS. As a scientist, how can you say that? Sensation is our gateway.

DOYLE. Yes? Gateway to what?

MORRIS. To understanding the rules of the world.

DOYLE. The world we walk upon. But what about the world of our imagination?

MORRIS. Exactly the same. People meet as physical beings in the Nether.

**DOYLE. But there are no longer physical barriers to that contact. Now we may communicate with anyone, through any form we choose. And this communication - this experience of each other — is the root of consciousness. It is the universe wanting to know itself. Can't you see what a wonder it is that we may interact outside our bodies?**

**MORRIS. Who are we when we “interact” without consequence? What is revealed by feeling an axe slide through the flesh of a little girl?**

**DOYLE. The revelation is when she resurrects and comes to stand before you again. Images, sensations — those are fleeting. It's the relationships that matter.**

[...]

**MORRIS. That is an egregious step, Mr. Doyle. And still highly experimental. You've probably looked into life support systems. I can tell you from experience they're not half as good as they're advertised. I've seen bodies, after only one year, that are unrecognizable.**

**DOYLE. This bag of flesh is unrecognizable.**

**MORRIS. We treat shades. It is a long battle to get them to accept themselves again, but our programs are designed to —**

[...] (HALEY, 2013, p. 22-23)

It could be said that Doyle goes beyond being a hard science teacher, because, curiously, he is able to bring philosophical intricacies to the stage when he tries to elucidate the representation of finite being in time. He tries to demonstrate that non-being serves as a representation of fleeting, unreal, finite images. What is really important are personal relationships. But how can you have a relationship without a body? Without being? How to have a relationship outside the body? How

do you touch what cannot be touched? How to love what is not there? How to love an abstraction? The wonder of communicating outside the body is the essence of the Nether. The out-of-body experience of each other transforms the being in space-time. Human consciousness is transformed into the extracorporeal, virtual touch is ephemeral, disconnected from the body and, if disconnected from the body, it is disconnected from itself, it is disconnected from being. For Doyle: “Images, sensations - these are fleeting. It’s the relationships that matter”. The essence of the Nether is nothing more than the empty stage haunted by time. If there is no time, you cannot be. The virtual avatar is nothing more than a shade, a ghostly being in the space of nothingness.

The characters often forget who they are. The question of consciousness, also raised by Doyle, is detached from being, because how can you truly communicate if you no longer have a body? Crossing over means giving up real life to live only in virtual reality. Bodies are now almost dead beings, connected to the machines that sustain them, in order to have a prototype of life in hell:

IRIS. Is something wrong?

WOODNUT: I have quite. Forgotten myself.

(He goes to the window, stands in the sunlight and shadows of leaves.)

IRIS. It’s okay to do that here, Mr. Woodnut. It’s okay to forget who you think you are.

(IRIS lifts her dress over her head and stands in her knickers.) (HALEY, 2013, p. 28).

Thus, you can forget who you are because, symbolically, death no longer exists and without the idea of finitude, of time, you lose sight of who you are. While their bodies wither, so do their consciousness. It is interesting to note that the stage direction points to Woodnut walking towards the sunlight and the shadows of the leaves on the ground. The connection between the Nether and the real world is made in a very subtle way at this point; there are delicate representations of exchange, the sun and the effect of sunlight touching the leaves. The shadow is not the leaf itself, but a representation of it. It may be possible to get closer to the idea of Plato's cave in Haley's play, but in the opposite direction. What are the shades here if not a new reality? In the exchange between Sim and Morris below, one can understand that being a shade has become a life ideal when it is no longer possible to experience the real world. The question of experience echoes Walter Benjamin in “Experience and Poverty” (1994) when he analyses the phenomenon of the decline of *Erfahrung* (experience) in a crescendo that ponders the psychosocial effects of the emergence of writing, the

press, the cultural industry, anonymous and uprooted living in big cities, in other words, a process of dehumanization. The reduction of experience is ultimately the destruction of tradition, that is, anything that is transmitted or brought into the present from the past. Experience loses its meaning in a world completely disfigured by the barbarity of the world wars and their devastating consequences, where the ‘tiny, fragile human body’ is faced with all the ostentation of the warlike apparatuses of mechanized warfare. The horrors of the First World War and its nefarious consequences show the decline of experience, challenging the possibility of narrating oneself. The way out is to hide in the Nether without realizing that the virtual world is even more hellish than the world outside.

And I have been eager for this encounter, Mr. Sims, so I could ask: How can you, in good conscience, infect people with this content?

**SIMS. People come to my realm of their own free will.**

**MORRIS. They’re enticed by its beauty. By sensations they can no longer experience in the real world.**

**SIMS. Is it my problem the real world no longer measures up?**

**MORRIS. I would say it’s all of our problem. But who’s going to do anything about it when they’re busy molesting children?**

[...]

**SIMS. Come on, you’re missing out. The point is — it doesn’t matter whether you kill a boar or a demon. Whether you have sex with a child or an elf. It’s nothing but images. And there is no consequence.**

**MORRIS. Images create reality. Everything around us — our houses, our bridges, our wars, our peace treaties, began as figments in someone’s mind before becoming a physical or social fact.**

**SIMS. Are you accusing me of creating pedophiles? If anything, I’m giving them a place to blow off steam.**

**MORRIS. You foster a culture of legitimization, telling them their desires are not only acceptable, but commendable —**

[...]

**SIMS. You track them like bloodhounds. Now you want to tell them what to do. Or rather, what not to do. What not to think. What not to feel.**

**MORRIS. You said yourself — the Nether is becoming our contextual framework for being. If it’s the same as life, the same laws should apply -**

**SIMS. It’s not the same way of being! It’s imagination! People should be free there. That’s one place where they should have total privacy.**

**MORRIS. There is a line, even in our imagination.**

**SIMS. You will never be able to enforce that. (HALEY, 2013, p. 29-31)**

Detective Morris reminds Sims that “images create reality. Everything that surrounds us - our houses, our bridges, our wars, our peace treaties - began as an invention in someone's mind before becoming a physical or social fact” (HALEY. 2013, p. 31). The human imagination is

capable of creating terrifying worlds where the most defenseless will necessarily suffer, especially when the people who can manipulate the system are calling the shots. And when the monsters of the imagination come out into the real world, there is no escaping them. Often, the play resembles an infinite game of poker with death, only you cannot bluff.

MORRIS. You cultivate a parade of little girls, each looking like the one before. You let them get close, but not too close. When they start expressing real emotion, it's off to boarding school. The guests choose from a set of looks that you provide. The children look the same, no matter who's behind them. The way everything appears is completely under your control. **You create a realm irresistible to anyone with a longing for beauty, go there each day, play the music, pull the strings and force everyone else to dance to your nightmare.**  
SIMS. I don't force anyone (HALEY, 2013, p. 47).

The play, which seemed to be about the ethical and moral issue of sexual crime perpetrated against children, takes a turn that goes beyond moral criticism and how a police procedural can expose the horrors of a nation by making use of that society's ultimate goal, in this case, the Nether. However, the beauty and perfection pursued by Sims, which echoes John Winthrop's (1630) idea of that new world becoming a City on a hill, that is, an example for the rest of the world to follow, is closely linked to pedophilia – when looking at the beauty stripped from childlike innocence and being able to harm that defenseless being. The idea of the perfect or perfectible world, carrying in its wake the idea of the American self-righteousness, goes in tandem with the proposition of the real possibility of evil perpetrated in that society. Winthrop's sermon, therefore, reveals itself terrifying when he agrees with that the model for the world is to abuse the innocence of minors, because only in the new world would there be the possibility of beauty, and therefore, of the perfect place (or utopia). Dancing to the sound of Sims' nightmare simply means agreeing to the possibility of creating a world according to the desires of power, here, of a powerful white man:

**PAPA. Perfecting this world is my obsession.**  
**WOODNUT. Do you think obsession is required?**  
**PAPA. For perfection?**  
**WOODNUT. For making the world as you think it should be.**  
**PAPA. Oh yes** (HALEY, 2013, p. 51).

The 13th scene takes place in Iris's bedroom, and it is there that the girl and Woodnut (the guest) talk about Papa's love and the exchange between them before the possibility of her being

axed. The virtual world again seems perfect and beautiful to the guest's eye and the mention of any kind of violence would simply be terrible. Iris, like Doyle, makes Woodnut understand that life is both beautiful and terrible. Life is a constant creating and destroying. The Nether has never been a beautiful place to develop true relationships or to love. But an empty representation of human relationships, without exchange, without love, liquid, making Zygmunt Bauman's words my own. The possibility of any human bond in the play vanishes as Iris (the virtual child) shows life as liable to annihilation, and therefore the impossibility of the existence of love. Love is exchange, complicity, walking in the same direction. In the dimension of evil, love is fragile, unreal and inconceivable. Sims/Papa uses Iris precisely because he knows that she loves him. The child puppet (just like love) is manipulated by hard hands devoid of compassion. Evil is trivialized, and the supposed childlike innocence of loving and being loved is shattered in the illusory world of nothingness. The dialogue between Woodnut and Iris below exemplifies this:

WOODNUT. It's so beautiful here. Why do we have to bring in something terrible?

IRIS. Beautiful. Terrible. It's like life.

WOODNUT. Except that it isn't.

IRIS. It's an opportunity to do something you could never do otherwise.

WOODNUT. I have already been with you in ways that —

**IRIS. That's one side. This is the other. Creation. Destruction. You begin to realize they're on the same wheel.**

[...]

**WOODNUT. I don't think this is Papa's plan. I think it's yours.**

**IRIS. That's not true. He created this place —**

**WOODNUT. Papa did not create this place to foster pure relationship. I think you've made that up to justify wanting to stay here.**

IRIS. Mr. Woodnut!

**WOODNUT. He does not love you.**

**IRIS. He does!**

**WOODNUT. You think because you feel love, so does everyone else —**

**IRIS. It's not just a feeling! He gave me something.**

**WOODNUT. (jerks) What did he give you?**

**IRIS. Just like you said. He told me something real.**

**WOODNUT. Something from his real life?**

**IRIS. Yes. I asked him, and he told me.**

[...]

WOODNUT. What was it?

IRIS. I cannot tell you.

WOODNUT. You must. You must tell me what he said.

IRIS. I cannot tell a soul.

WOODNUT. Don't you trust me?

IRIS. Of course I do. And Papa trusts me.

**WOODNUT. He doesn't trust you — he controls you! He controls everything! He sits at his terminal and makes you dance at the end of his strings! [...]** (HALEY: 2013, p. 54, 55).

By the end of the play, the spectator realizes that he too has been manipulated. Iris is, outside the Nether, a 60-year-old gay man who hides behind the innocence of a little girl in order to get close to Sims. Doyle commits suicide at the end of the play and in dying he ceases to exist; he ceases to be. Returning to Heidegger, death is the most extreme and certain possibility. Death is also the most personal and non-transferable possibility, in other words, death is always death itself. The ethereal being ceases to be, there is no more body to manipulate the puppets.

MORRIS. Mr. Sims, Iris was a sixty-five-year-old man.

SIMS. Stop. We have the right to remain anonymous.

MORRIS. He was a middle school science teacher with a wife and a daughter.

[...]

**MORRIS. We brought him here for questioning. After three days we sent him back to the Hideaway to get the information we needed. And then. Before we knew what he was doing. He disengaged from our terminal and hanged himself.**

[...]

**SIMS. I don't know, because this room, this world has been so perverted by other people's ideas of what it should be. You and your speeches on images creating reality and why don't we make a better reality — and look around! Look at this room. Look at what you've created. A place to twist people. A place to terrorize them. What did you do to Mr. Doyle? Did you make him see the truth? Did you bring him to the light? Did you save him? No, actually, what you did was betray his trust, drag him from a place where he felt safe and submit him to psychological torture until he killed himself** (HALEY, 2013, p. 67-69).

Sims sees the world outside the Nether through lenses as perverted as his own. In trying to perfect reality, Sims/Papa drags with him all the ghosts of a past that cannot be relegated to oblivion. He inverts what the Nether really is, a demonic world where all evil can be perpetrated, and contrasts it with a real world that he says is dark, where the interrogation room is a room for perverting people, for terrorizing them. Taking Doyle out of the Nether only served to make him disconnect from time, cease to exist, cease to be. It seems a paradox if we think that the question of human existence is not real in the dimension of evil, again, here there is no longer a human, only a shade of it. And if he ceases to exist, what remains is vacuum, nothingness.

### A descent into the dimension of evil: a conclusion

In his *Opinion* column in *The Guardian* on February 27, 2025, Robert Reich exposes the clear connection between power and wealth in the US. The professor of public policy at the University of California, Berkley, opens his text by stating that “one of the unacknowledged advantages of the horrendous era we’ve entered is that it is revealing the putrid connections between great wealth and great power for all to see” (2025). It is impossible to deny the connection between the world of 2025 and the almost prophetic power of Jennifer Haley's 2013 play. Twelve years after its premiere, we live in a sickeningly artificial world piercingly connected by ghosts from the past that no longer haunt us. Watching the current US president and his millionaire cronies threaten the rest of the world has become commonplace in our daily lives. The violence declared against minorities in his speech to Congress on March 4, 2025, mirrors the violence in the Nether, after all, controlling the weakest has always been part of the North American character.

Sims/Papa is the rich white man who created the Nether, a virtual place where you can be whoever you want to be and where pedophiles act free of any kind of punishment - after all, these are not real crimes against children's bodies that exist in the world outside the Nether, they are virtual crimes, and therefore not punishable. This is the premise of the creator of the dimension of evil: living in the Nether is like transposing an avatar into a world where anything is possible, echoing the Manifest Destiny, a term coined by John O'Sullivan and mentioned by Donald Trump in his second inauguration speech. The Manifest Destiny, explained by another fundamental concept rooted in that society, the idea of “American exceptionalism”, mirrors the idea of the superior people, chosen by god. The chosen people can, without any limit, use extreme violence to control the rest of the world. It could be said that, in a way, the Nether is the United States of America, the haunted house, ephemeral, ambivalent, devoid of love, where the horrors of the past are perpetuated continuously, but, unfortunately, no one acknowledges them. In the world of nothingness, extracorporeal beings, there is no responsibility. So, I question Horsley's proposition again: isn't it in contemporary American theater where we find this tendency to blur the line between ‘fact’ and ‘fiction’?



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