

# Chaos/Complexity Theory and Postmodern Poetry: A Case Study of Jorie Graham's "Fuse"

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## Abstract

Chaos/complexity theory has recently been applied to literary texts. The present article aims at investigating how this theory has been applied to literary works, and what new perspectives this methodology can provide for literary interpretation. For this purpose, a poem titled "Fuse" composed by the U.S. postmodern poet, Jorie Graham, has been selected. Complexity theory proposes the idea that "within chaos there is order." Therefore, the article looks for cases of order in "Fuse" that prevent its total disintegration. Although the poet's rhetoric and linguistic experimentations are regarded as the strange attractors that disrupt the poem from within, the hold of the poem's mythical subtext and the use of numbers to separate stanzas from one another are taken as attractors that bring back sort of order to "Fuse." The poem concludes that chaos/complexity theory proposes a systematic approach to analyze a fragmented text for the reappraisal of both chaos and order.

## Keywords

postmodern, chaos, Graham, order, complexity

## Introduction

Literary criticism is nowadays tasting and testing the pros and cons of a recently scientific theory known as chaos theory, also referred to as complexity theory. The application of a purely science-based methodology to different literary genres has given rise to some controversies from scholars of either discipline. This theory has emerged almost the same time as postmodernism became in vogue. However, it has been less than a decade that scientists have started giving it the due credit. Officially speaking, therefore, it is a new fledgling approach especially among scholars of literature. The present article aims at investigating how this theory has been applied to literary works, and what new perspectives this methodology can provide for literary interpretation. Moreover, the potentials of this approach are scrutinized, while its weaknesses are hinted at (if any). The realization of such objectives entails analyzing a postmodern text through this lens. For this purpose, a poem titled "Fuse" composed by the U.S. postmodern poet, Jorie Graham, has been selected.

Compared with traditional literary works, a postmodern text is complex, chaotic, and unstable and will remain so, no matter what methodology the reader deploys to impose sort of interpretation on it. The present study uses chaos theory as a tool to see what aspects of the text are highlighted, which have previously been ignored. Complexity theory proposes the idea that "within chaos there is order"; it, thus, helps investigate the cases of order within Graham's selected poem. This article comprises two main parts. In the first part,

the chaotic world of "Fuse" is examined. This entails analyzing the poem linguistically, rhetorically, and personologically. The second part of the study looks for order within the chaotic world of the text. The curious point that raises here is whether the supposed order can be traced in all dimensions of the poem or just in some of them. Finding reasons, or better to say, providing justifications, for the existence of order in "Fuse" may help a better appreciation of the whole poem.

## Literature Review

The study of chaos theory should start with the definition of system. In Sardar and Abrams's (1999) view, "any entity that changes with time is called a *system*" (as cited in Kakonge, 2002, p. 65). In the same vein, Smith and Samuelson (2003) believe that changing over time is an integrated property of a system (in Seyyedrezae, 2014). As Malcolm (accessed 2016) introduces, chaos theory is a mathematical subdiscipline that studies complex systems. He further refers to the Quantum Mechanical Revolution and how it put an end to the deterministic era. In his observation, chaos theory replaced the causal relation that science used to impose on nature to account for

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its changes based on randomness. As Tom LeClair (1987, 1989) notes, “causal thinking posits closed systems, denies observer participation, and makes all phenomena subject to a unitary method that measures parts, traces energy transfers between entities, and creates linear chains of efficient causes” (LeClair, 1989, p. 71, in Slethaug, 2000, p. 28). Against the linearity of causality, one can refer to the notion of turbulence to which all systems are subject at any time (Gould, 1989; Prigogine & Stengers, 1984; White, 1990). Turbulence, as defined by Gleick (1987), “is a mass of disorder at all scales . . . It is unstable . . . highly dissipative, meaning that turbulence drains energy and creates drag. It is motion turned random” (p. 122, in Slethaug, 2000, p. 63). In James Townsend’s (1992) words, with chaos theory, there is “disorder, jumble, and confusion from certainty itself” (p. 66); it is “now part and parcel of nonlinear dynamics and as such is seeing day-by-day advances in a myriad of fields” (p. 67).

Chaos theory is based on three important principles: The first one is called “butterfly effect”; this means “a tiny difference in initial parameters will result in a completely different behavior of a complex system” (Malcolm, 2016). What this implies is that similar phenomena or systems can never be identical. These unpredictable initial conditions may “lead to the so-called butterfly effect, in which an extremely minor and remote factor causes disruptions of a huge magnitude” (Slethaug, 2000, p. 62). The second principle is what Malcolm refers to as the “Uncertainty Principle,” which prohibits accuracy. The third principle is that of strange attractor. Complex systems tend to settle in one specific situation. This situation is called attractor if it is static; and if it is dynamic, it is called “strange attractor” (Malcolm, retrieved 2016). In a chaotic system, small perturbations lead to chaos (Kakonge, 2002).

In addition to unpredictability, butterfly effect, and strange attractor, Larsen-Freeman (1997) enumerates some other basic characteristics of chaos theory, which are also common to language learning process. These features are being dynamic (the system is processual), complex (the system has many parts that are in constant action and interaction), nonlinear (effect is disproportionate to the cause), open (energy/information can flow in and out), self-organizing (a pattern emerges as components interact), adaptive (optimizes itself according to the environment), and chaotic (a deep, coherent structure within apparent randomness; as cited in Seyyedrezae, 2014).

In Slethaug’s (2000) analysis, the accessibility of chaos theory for scholars of the arts was made possible in 1987 with the publication of James Gleick’s *Chaos: Making a New Science*. Gleick (1987) traces the origins of chaos theory to Einstein’s relativity theory, Heisenberg’s theory of uncertainty, and Planck’s view that energy is not continuous but comes in small quanta. In literature, one can refer to Harriet Hawkins’s (1995) *Strange Attractors*, which examines works of Shakespeare and Milton through the concepts provided by chaos theory. Ira Livingston (1984) has explored chaos

theory in both the romantic and contemporary domains. Thomas Jackson Rice (1997) focuses on sections of works of James Joyce through the lens of chaos theory. Some other writers such as Robert Nadeau (1981), Susan Strehle (1992), and N. Katherine Hayles (1984, 1990, 1991) have concerned themselves with the interface of modern literature and literary theories with modern physics.

Following chaos theory, complexity theory stresses self-organization of chaos into order (Brady in Slethaug, 2000). Chaos theory deals with how order irrupts into chaos. But complexity theory proposes the idea that “within chaos there is order”; therefore, as Kakonge (2002) states, “Complex systems, with many different independent variables interacting with each other, can balance order and chaos” (p. 65). Therefore, chaos and complexity theories both deal with the intricate relationship of order and chaos. There are different views on the relationship between order and chaos. Prigogine and Stengers (1984) argue that order arises from chaos; for Mandelbrot (1977), order is inherent in chaos; and Waldrop (1992) states chaos arises from order (Slethaug, 2000). In Slethaug’s (2000) words, “Despite their tension, randomness, and pattern, chaos and order exist in co-dependency, and the artistic imagination activates, engages, and enhances them” (p. x). Slethaug’s study applies chaos theory to works of current fiction that draw on issues of chaotics, experiment with linear narrative forms, use chaotic patterns for structural purposes, and embrace rhetoric of chaos theory. John Barth (n.d.) describes the chaotic patterns as “arabesque carpet design” (as cited in Slethaug, 2000, p. 335), which structures the metaphors and content of contemporary American writing.

Slethaug (2000) justifies his drawing on a scientific methodology for literary appreciation in the light of works of such writers as John Briggs (1992), Briggs and F. David Peat (1989), and Michael Field and Martin Golubitsky (1992); these figures have shown the central ideas of science, which can often serve as “guidelines, focal points, paradigms, models, mirrors, and metaphors for treatments of narrative” (Slethaug, 2000, p. ixv). Following the same lead, the present article attempts a reading of Graham’s “Fuse” through the lens of chaos/complexity theory.

As a postmodern text, “Fuse” is marked with the poet’s experimentations. In Slethaug’s (2000) apt analysis,

Experiments with artistic and literary forms—pointillism, cubism, collage, pastiche, fragmentation, disruptive language, and many more—these were the techniques that set the stage for the defining moments of postmodernism and chaos theory as important artistic, literary, and scientific movements of the ’80s and ’90s. (p. 5)

For the postmodern theorist, Baudrillard, chaos theory is an attempt to fill a void left by the disappearance of a metaphysical destiny. He views it as a “parody of any metaphysics of destiny.” He locates the charms of postmodern poetry in the fact that it is the “poetry of initial conditions . . . now

that we no longer possess a vision of final conditions, and Chaos stands in for us as a negative destiny” (p. 113, cited in Slethaug, 2000, p. 14).

In fiction, John Barth and in poetry, William Carlos Williams have used new physics and technology in their works (Slethaug, 2000). Williams is famous for his Einsteinian “relativity of measurements” in poetry based on which he votes for “loosening of” or “breaking away” from musical rhythms and rhymes and instead votes for “more flexible strophes and verse paragraphs” (as cited in Slethaug, 2000, p. 7). Williams (1954) justifies his unique fashion as a way which helps the artist reflect new scientific thought, which helps to discover “that possible thing which is disturbing the metrical table of values” (cited in Slethaug, 2000, p. 7). This trend in postmodern writers and poets have led Brian McHale (1987) to conclude, postmodern writing “turns out to be mimetic after all, but this imitation of reality is accomplished not so much at the level of its content, which is often manifestly un- or anti-realistic, as at the level of form” (p. 38, cited in Slethaug, 2000, p. 7). Slethaug (2000) aptly uses the term “dynamic” to describe the structure of postmodern fiction (p. 8).

Williams (1954) calls attention to the use of language within a text and Slethaug (2000) highlights the role of metaphor in this respect. Patrick Brady (1994) views that chaologists extrapolate from one science to another, from the sciences to the humanities; in this light, Williams (1954) contends use of metaphors creates analogy between turbulent conditions in human affairs and unstable conditions in nature “to lessen the intellectual and emotional distance that separates literature from its readers” (Slethaug, 2000, p. 9). Brady (1994) refers to rococo in art, in which irregular shapes give way to a principle of order, as an instance of metaphor, which brings literature and chaos theory together (in Slethaug, 2000). N. Katherine Hayles (1991) takes one step further and accentuates the role of modes of articulation and rhetorical discourse; these modes render postmodern art self-distorting, ironic, and replicative mirroring of traditional forms and characterization (Jencks, 1995, in Slethaug, 2000). Such features render postmodern text recursive and iterative.

In chaos theory, iteration involves “the continual reabsorption or enfolding of what has come before” (Briggs & Peat, 1989, p. 66, in Slethaug, 2000, p. 124). It is not merely repetition; it rather uses the previous forms and then, by accretion and deletion, accounts for changes in them (Slethaug, 2000). Slethaug (2000) recognizes iteration as “a basic fact of science, an important foundation stone in chaos theory, an inherent part of the writing and reading process in literature, and fundamental to art and architecture” (p. 124). Iteration simultaneously invokes previous patterns and strategically veers away from them: “The shape it traces is the strange attractor,” which accounts for the system’s unpredictability (Briggs & Peat, 1989, p. 75). Like iteration, recursion is integrally related to attractors, “for patterns that are recursive tend to retrace their main features over time” (Slethaug, 2000, pp. 147-148).

## Method

Jorie Graham’s (2000) poem, “Fuse,” is included in her collection of poems, *Swarm*; it comprises five numbered parts of varying lengths. The main title of the poem is followed by the parenthetical information: “(The Watchman, *Agamemnon*).” This parenthetical subtitle gives the poem a mythical subtext. The present study detects both chaos and order in the poem. The analysis of the poem is divided into two main parts. The first part focuses on chaos and disorder in rhetorical, linguistic, and personological dimensions of the poem. The second part aims at tracing cases of order in the paratextual and graphological aspects. The rhetorical dimension deals with poetic devices and figures of speech that Graham deploys to create the chaotic world of her poem. The major rhetorical device used in the poem is pun. The analysis shows how Graham’s play on the word “sentence” gives the whole poem at least two layers of meaning. Stylistic analysis is carried out on both macro-level of the whole poem and micro-level of each stanza. On the macro-level, parody of the mythical subtext of the poem is discussed and on the micro-level, the stylistic features of the five stanzas are pinpointed.

The linguistic dimension of the poem encompasses syntactic, semantic, and graphological aspects of the poem. Read in the light of the central pun on “sentence,” the semantic analysis reveals how metaphors and similes of the poem change when read each time in the light of one of the meanings of the word “sentence.” The syntactic structure of the poem is also discussed to be influenced by the chaos and instability the technique of pun brings onstage of the poem. Graphologically also, the arrangement, punctuation, and numbering of the stanzas are taken into consideration and their chaotic nature is shown.

The last dimension, which is worked on here, is the personality of the speaker of the poem. The personological analysis of the narrator of the poem reveals the speaker is a postmodern man stricken by disorder, dissipation, fragmentation, jumble, and chaos. It is shown that he is of a borderline style of personality, which like the poem itself is chaotic.

## Analysis

The analysis of “Fuse” is carried out in two main sections. The first section approaches the poem from the lens of chaos theory, locating chaotic instances in the form of interruptions, irruptions, dissipations, and turbulence of the text, which render the text nonlinear, dynamic, open, unstable, and unpredictable. The second section takes up the lens of complexity theory and looks for cases that impose sort of order on the text in its different levels and tries to determine the interrelationship between order and chaos of the poem.

### Section I: Chaos

This section looks for chaotic instances in the form of deviations from the norms in the poem’s linguistic, stylistic, textual,

and personological dimensions. Linguistically, this article mainly addresses the syntactic, semantic, and graphological levels of the poem.

*Syntactic.* Graham's (2000) poem develops out of various deviations from syntactical rules. The sentences of the poem are of varying lengths. The main criterion for calling a word or set of words a sentence is the punctuation mark with which it reaches sort of ending, namely, exclamation mark, full stop, semicolon, and question mark. The shortest sentence in the poem has only one word like "Ash!"; and, the longest one runs through 32 lines, which comprise the fourth stanza, and just in the first line of the fifth stanza it ends up with a question mark. Most of the sentences of the poem deviate from grammatical rules. As an instance, one can refer to the second line of the poem, which ending up in a full stop leaves the reader in a shock:

The appearance of me. (Graham, 2000, p. 80)

The full stop gives the sentence a sense of finality, while the unfinished phrase frustrates the grammatical competence of the reader. This contrast marks the line and the whole poem with tension. The tension that comes from the incompatibility between the punctuation mark and the unfinished set of words disrupts the coherence of the poem and makes it chaotic.

Another instance is from the first stanza: "For a full hour once just stared at one rose" (Graham, 2000, p. 80). This sentence lacks a subject; within the context of the whole stanza, it can be concluded the subject of "stared" can be the speaker, the watchman, who can also be the fighter in

On this high spot fighting to stay awake. (Graham, 2000, p. 80)

The longer the sentences, the looser the syntactic hold and the more chaotic:

. . . The prior story

lit once when there appeared to be

a master also fighting to keep

awake, fighting for total objectivity, pagan in character, fighting

towards total objectivity, what this unraveling storyline

would lead me towards: *knowing: by heart:*

under stars, by rosebush, with dog,

sometimes not among them when they fall by

accident, (Graham, 2000, p. 81, emphasis in original)

These lines continue in another 21 lines. As they show, two stories are interwoven together here: the story of the king, Agamemnon, fighting against Troy, and the story of the watchman who is waiting for the sign of the king's victory. However, the syntactic structure of the quoted lines looks so disintegrated that it demands the reader to step in and sort them out. Therefore, through such syntactic fragmentations, the poet makes a chaos and thereby involves and confuses the reader. Nonetheless, many questions in such long sentences remain unanswered. In the quoted case, what does the prior story refer to? Is it the mythical story of Agamemnon? Or, the story of the rising rosebush, which the watchman talks about in the previous stanza? It could also refer to the lighting arrows that the watchman is awaiting as they announce the victory of the king in the fight. How does the "prior story" relate to the "unraveling storyline"? Do they both refer to the same story? If no, what is the story of each one? The same chaotic confusion applies to the italicized words "*knowing: by heart:*" each of which is followed by colons. The reader can never decide what is known by heart by the watchman and/or the king; it seems as if the appearance of the colons is just an illusion to the reader. The colons promise further explanation or clarification; but what follows is further confusion.

Syntactic chaos is achieved through such operations as repetition, substitution, subtraction, and displacement. Graham's (2000) poem has syntactic repetitions, which render its language chaotic. As an instance one can refer to

Always drowsy. Never spelled. (Graham, 2000, p. 80)

The two fragments end in full stops without having the requirements a complete sentence has. The adverbs of frequency "always" and "never" are both followed by adjectives. Such a structure fragments the text. The same impression is achieved when a list of adjectives appears in the first stanza; the adjectives are merely separated by comas and end up with a full stop:

Up-flaunting, irregular, winged, without any soul. (Graham, 2000, p. 80)

This cataloging structure recurs in the second stanza:

by the burning (city)—by the thinking it forces down to me, here, one

phrase,

one, from burning mouth to breaking heart, (Graham, 2000, p. 81)

Also in the fourth stanza,

even the listener, here now, you, wishing the grace of

finish,

would wary of arrival, (Graham, 2000, p. 81)

The first impression such listing or cataloging leaves on the reader is the telegraphic tone it gives to the diction, and the immediacy of expressions that lack the syntactic requirements to join them together disrupts the text and makes it chaotic.

Syntactic substitution occurs when one thing replaces some other thing and renders it chaotic:

Mornings it emerging from shadow to tell its one story over.  
(Graham, 2000, p. 80)

Syntactically, the main verb, “emerge” takes third person “s” but “ing” has taken its place to show the continuity of the action.

In case of subtraction, some element which is required is omitted, like in “The appearance of me,” which has a gesture of being a complete sentence without fulfilling the reader’s syntactic competence.

As a case of displacement one can refer to the phrase,

Disfigurement of the outline-me (Graham, 2000, p. 83)

Here, “outline-me” separated by a hyphen is a case of syntactic substitution and displacement in which “my” is replaced by “me” and appears after “outline” by a hyphen, while it should occur before “outline.” The same applies to the word “lampblack” in the first stanza, which is expected to be “black lamp.”

*Semantic chaos.* “Fuse” owes its dynamism to the semantic chaos most of the words of the poem bear. Semantics deals with the relation between sign and reality. This relation is already disturbed by the syntactic chaos of the poem. For example, in the list of adjectives referred to in the previous section,

Up-flaunting, irregular, winged, without any soul. (Graham, 2000, p. 80)

the syntactic structure does not clarify what/who the modified is. But the context of the stanza makes one decide these adjectives modify the rosebush. Even so, for a rosebush, modifiers “winged” and “without any soul” seem out of question.

The greatest semantic tension of “Fuse” arises due to the pun the poem plays on the word “sentence.” This word can have at least two main meanings: First, “sentence” is “a string of words satisfying the grammatical rules of a language.” In this sense, “sentence” is associated with the discourse of language and, thus, has a verbal base. The second meaning is “a final judgment of guilty in a criminal case and the punishment that is imposed.” Read in the line of the

mythical subtext of the poem, the second meaning can also be associated with the discourse of war and guardianship. A glance over the whole poem shows the speaker’s attentive selection of words supports both the first and the second meanings of “sentence.” Such selection gives the poem form of doubling, encouraging the reader to read the text from the two perspectives (verbal and nonverbal; see Tables 1 and 2).

This selection contains almost 36 cases, which link the word “sentence” with legal, official, and war discourses.

The above-mentioned catalogs show the semantic tension that the pun on “sentence” gives to the poem and renders it chaotic semantically. The pun makes the text semantically unstable, making it wander between the two possibilities. In a chaotic terminology, each one of the words, expressions, and phrases cataloged above that disturbs the linear conformity of the text to either one of the discourses functions as a strange attractor, because the appearance of a single word, for example, from the verbal discourse, within the context of the nonverbal discourse, disturbs it and drags it to the verbal one. The same applies to the disrupting effect of the words related to the nonverbal dimension of “sentence” when they dissipate the verbal realm of the text.

*Graphological chaos.* The other instance of chaos that “Fuse” deploys is related to the graphologic dimension of the poem. The graphological aspect of the poem includes punctuation marks; spaces between words, lines, and stanzas; and the physical arrangement of words and lines on page. Graham’s poem does not conform to the graphological norms of poetry writing just as it frustrates the semantic and syntactic competences. The very first feature of the poem that attracts the eye of the reader is the uncommon and unjustifiable spaces that are placed within single lines. Even the spaces are not of the same length to put the second parts of lines in a hierarchical order:

It is a sentence      the long watch I keep.

The appearance of me.      Forgive the absurdity. (Graham, 2000, p. 80)

Among the five stanzas, the first stanza has the most cases of such style of spacing; in the second stanza, only the last line has this feature in “the passage of time” (Graham, 2000, p. 82). In the third stanza, one line almost in the middle of the stanza is like this: “not wanting time wasted” (Graham, 2000, p. 82). In the fourth stanza, the first and last lines have such kind of spacing. And, in the last stanza, there are four almost short lines (lines 7, 8, 9, and 10), which are marked by such uncommon spacing. The first and immediate impression of such spacing, which usually occurs exactly where words are syntactically cemented together is fragmentation and dissolution of the components of the line. Moreover, this space singles out the artificiality of the way words are joined together and, thus,

**Table 1.** The Verbal Dimension of “Sentence.”

Stanza	Words, phrases, and expressions
Stanza 1	“to thread its syntax,” “through rocky throat,” “to tell its one story over”
Stanza 2	“be dressed by endings”; “one phrase”; “burning mouth”; “each one out loud”; “The prior story”; “total objectivity”; “this unraveling storyline”; “at the top of the sentence, the open mouth”; “towards explanation”
Stanza 3	“a tune a syntax,” “an echo,” “the news,” “the god of words,” “tense with outstripping thought,” “the uttered reaching me,” “I spin this listening,” “I take its meaning”
Stanza 4	“forgetting word by word,” “using the breath down to the last broadcast,” “voice filling every step,” “the listener,” “meaning,” “it must come from the mouth,” “to nurse on meaning”
Stanza 5	“A furious listening,” “Scorn in it,” “midsentence,” “there is singing,” “overhearable,” “You’ve read enough now,” “One hears a little of what one hears”

Note. The table presents words, phrases, and expressions that support the linguistic sense of “sentence.” In all these, 36 single words refer directly to the linguistic sense of “sentence.”

exposes them and the whole line to dissipation. The space itself gives room for silence and the silence detotalizes the authority of the spoken words and of the language on the whole. Envisaged as such, the silence is a gesture to the many other unsaid words and expressions that could have been said but have been left out, crossed out, as being unfitted for the line. Yet, the line bears their invisible footprints. The pauses such spacing gives to the process of reading also function as strange attractors, which can deviate the course of line and of the poem on the whole. This is the point that the last stanza refers to metaphorically:

And how midsentence      god persists

On pauses      (a style) (Graham, 2000, p. 84)

The parenthetical notion of “a style” attracts the attention of the reader to the deliberate spacing, which singles out the lines and is, thus, a basic feature of the poem’s style. The statement that “god persists/On pauses” is of significance here; the persistence of god is not through words, as the Bible equates God with word: “And God was the Word.” Rather, it is through pauses that god is given persistence because words freeze and stabilize god, whereas pauses in their silences make god fluid as silence itself is. Silence, symbolized graphologically, here becomes the only way which “says” the unsayable and “represents” the unrepresentable. Whereas a word is fixed, silence is marked with instability and unpredictability. Thus, silence is the realm of chaos.

**Table 2.** The Nonverbal Dimension of “Sentence.”

Stanza	Words, phrases, and expressions
Stanza 1	“the long watch I keep,” “chains grow strong,” “fighting to stay awake,” “keep by me,” “apology,” “rising red from its tomb,” “flare,” “fire by fire”
Stanza 2	“individual fires,” “the burning (city),” “it forces down to me,” “press my stare,” “gorgeous agitation,” “prowling my glance,” “fighting,” “they fall,” “watching,” “awake,” “dew, patience, terror somewhere in my back”
Stanza 3	“there’s your signal clear and true,” “revenge,” “bloodier,” “wearing the armor of time”
Stanza 4	“a ferocious bleeding,” “grip it,” “vanquish,” “how afraid we are,” “in our throne”
Stanza 5	“Long punishment,” “Ash!,” “death’s game: outsidedness,” and “animal joy”

Note. The table presents words, phrases, and expressions that support the nonlinguistic sense of “sentence.”

The other feature of the poem is the disorderly arrangement of lines on page. Some words are deliberately detached from the line and taken not to the beginning of the next line, but to its end without any structural, rhythmical, or rhyme-oriented justification. A good case is the beginning lines of the second stanza:

Strange sweetness,

sketched-in more rapidly at times by skittish      winds

against your wall,

abstract yet always perfectly

explicit in your rising un-

repeatable gestures— (Graham, 2000, p. 80)

Such graphologic experimentations with words and lines of the poem defamiliarizes the reader by frustrating his or her search for linearity. This style not only bears the chaotic consequences assigned to spacing in the middle of the sentence but also challenges the notion of linearity itself.

The other case of graphologic chaos is punctuation, which has been referred to in syntactic dimension. “Fuse” develops out of deviating from norms of punctuation. Just as the length of some of its sentences covers a whole or most of a stanza, lack of proper punctuation marks where they are expected confuses the reader and brings about semantic and interpretative confusion. As an instance, one can refer to the second stanza:

. . . what this unraveling storyline

would lead me towards: *knowing: by heart:*

under stars, by rosebush, with dog, (Graham, 2000, p. 81)

the italicized words “knowing: by heart:” are both followed by colons. The use of colons arouses in the reader the expectation that some definition, example, clarification, or explanation would follow. But all the succeeding lines refuse such a mission. This discrepancy brings about a semantic tension to the line and puts under question the logic of punctuation marks.

As another case, one can refer to the last line of the first stanza:

How to drive a point home when there is no point. Or home.  
(Graham, 2000, p. 80)

The sudden and full separation of “Or home” from the main body of the sentence by a full stop makes the meaning of the sentence unstable. The term “home” here is, thus, marked by the improper use of punctuation mark, because the poet wants to play a pun on the word. The word “home” can be, in continuation of the main sentence, treated as part of the expression “drive a point home”; or, it can refer to the homecoming of Agamemnon, the king, who is fighting in Trojan War. Ironically enough, he returns safely from a 9-year war to be killed in his home.

The poem has 19 dashes, which have the same chaotic impressions on the text as spacing. A dash brings the reading process to a pause, opens up space for the unsaid, and by introducing a new item in between, takes the text out of its linearity.

### Textual Chaos

On the textual level, “Fuse” has intertextual relation with its mythical subtext, *Agamemnon*. As stated before, the title of the poem is parenthetically subtitled: “(The Watchman, *Agamemnon*).” Paratextually also, the text is annotated by Graham (2000):

“Fuse”: not so much in the language, but in its positioning of its subject, this poem owes a debt to Robert Fagles’ translation of the *Oresteia*, as well as to his brilliant introduction to that book. (p. 114)

As notified by Fagles (1979), the *Oresteia* used to be a tetralogy—*Agamemnon*, *The Libation Bearers*, *The Eumenides*, and *Proteus*. The last one, *Proteus*, has not survived; so today, they regard the *Oresteia* as a trilogy. The action of the *Oresteia* begins more than 9 years after the start of Trojan War. The *Agamemnon* is set after the fall of Troy when Cassandra is seized by Agamemnon. The play describes how

his wife, Clytaemnestra, kills her husband to avenge death of their daughter, Iphigeneia, whom Agamemnon had to sacrifice at the outset of his expedition to Troy. A watchman has been posted on the roofs, waiting for a beacon that will signal Agamemnon’s victory and alert Clytaemnestra for his assassination. On the watchman’s mood, Fagles (1979) writes in his introduction,

Despite the impending triumph he is restless, he wavers between sleep and wakefulness, love for his master and servitude to his queen, devotion to the gods—the stately patriarchal stars—and the dread of the shooting star that this mannish woman may release. Things are moving towards some strange eruption. (p. 10)

It is this state of in-betweenness, this sense of would-be eruption that Graham picks up in her “Fuse” and, thus, renders her poem chaotic. When the beacon flames from the nearby mountaintop, the watchman cries for joy and the note of foreboding rushes back. Fagles (1979) writes, “We begin in dark suspense: we are waiting for the light, and it no sooner dispels anxiety than a shadow falls again” (p. 10). The description “dark suspense” aptly fits in the chaotic moment “Fuse” portrays. Therefore, the mythical subtext of the poem has a chaotic atmosphere. Graham conveys this chaos not only through the subject but also through its language, as discussed above.

Apart from the subtitle and the annotation, which link the poem to the play, *Agamemnon*, some sentences from the play appear within the poem. One can refer to the beginning lines of the play:

Dear gods, set me free from all the pain,

the long watch I keep, one whole year awake . . .

propped on my arms, crouched on the roofs of Atreus like a dog.

I know the stars by heart, the armies of the night . . . (Fagles, 1979, p. 55)

In the poem, “Dear gods” changes to “Dear sentence so filled with deferral” (Graham, 2000, p. 82) in the fourth stanza. “the long watch I keep” is used with no change in the poem. The sentence, “I know the stars by heart,” changes to “Knowing by heart the stars.” Also line 37 of the play, “Beginning to dance, then breaking off, lost in thought” appears in the poem both in parentheses and italicized. This way of marking the line draws the attention of the reader to itself.

There are two other cases. One is the Leader’s question, which expresses his sense of doubt about the authenticity of the news of victory: “And who on earth could run the news so fast” (line 280; Fagles, 1979, p. 60). This question changes into “but who on earth could run the news so fast?” The

substitution of “And” by “but” signifies a twist or a shift, which brings the content of the line in contrast to what is expected. The other case is line 291 in the play: “No time to waste, straining, fighting sleep” that changes into

Not wanting      time wasted, (Graham, 2000, p. 82)

In such changes, Graham is rewriting the mythical chaotic world in her own style. The changes bring tensions between the postmodern text and its mythical subtext. The similar words and expressions resemble the text to its subtext but the changes, albeit minor, differentiate them from each other. This paradoxical relation brings the two texts into sort of textual turbulence wherein neither one can be assuredly pinned down to a fixed point. Within the textual chaos thus created, one cannot take “Fuse” as a purely postmodern text belonging to this era, or regard it as a poem purely on the ancients. In this light, “Fuse” can be claimed to be a textual “dark suspense.”

### *Personological Dimension*

The last but not the least important dimension of the chaotic world of “Fuse” is concerned with the personality of the speaker, the watchman himself. The whole poem is his narrative cast in first-person point of view. The language as analyzed is chaotic; the textual dimension of the poem informs his situation is also a turbulent one; he is caught between the king and the queen, between devotion and betrayal, between moral choices, which are blurred here. On one hand, Agamemnon has killed his own daughter, and for this, he should be punished. On the other hand, he has brought victory for his land after 10 years of battle; and for this, he should be praised. The watchman is joyful for the victory and simultaneously anxious for the revenge plan at home. Fagles (1979) aptly quotes Nietzsche’s motto for Aeschylean tragedy, “All that exists is just and unjust and equally justified in both” (p. 5). This justifies the moral turbulence of the poem, in which nothing is more right or wrong than the others. The poem is not trying any sort of resolution; what Graham is seeking is laying bare the chaotic situation and its tormenting and disruptive holds on man. One way of presenting the chaos in the world is to distort the personality of the speaker. Therefore, a cognitive-behavioral approach to the personality of the watchman in the poem is needed to investigate his personological lens, which is best reflected in his words, expressions, and jumbling feelings.

Among the different personological prototypes, analyzed by Paul R. Rasmussen (2005), the watchman resembles mostly the borderline prototype, which is marked by being chaotic. What renders the borderline individuals chaotic is their constant vacillation between a “focus on themselves and their internal states and a focus on the behaviors, intentions, and feelings of others” (Rasmussen, 2005, p. 122). This reflects their dichotomous attention to

events. This personological style is known for being “inconsistent, chaotic, and often frantic interpersonal behaviors” (Rasmussen, 2005, p. 123). In Beck, Davis, and Freeman’s (1990) analysis, to borderline individuals, “the world is dangerous, they are relatively powerless, and they need others. . . . Subsequently, the borderline style is marked by chronic tension and anxiety, vigilance for danger, and guardedness in relationships” (Rasmussen, 2005, p. 123). They lack a self-sufficient sense of identity; when they are not connected with a defining person or group, they feel empty or void (Rasmussen, 2005). They are usually prone to absolute thinking; thus, such dichotomizing terms as “always,” “never,” “all,” “no one” recur frequently in their speech (Rasmussen, 2005, p. 140).

Millon and Davis (2000) enumerate four variations of the borderline style: the discouraged borderline, the impulsive borderline, the petulant borderline, and the self-destructive borderline. The last pattern best applies to Graham’s watchman. This pattern applies to an individual who is “unpredictable, restless, irritable, impatient, complaining, disgruntled, stubborn, sullen, pessimistic, resentful and envious” (Millon & Davis, 2000, p. 420). These persons usually take suicidal gesture and are marked by suicidal ideation (Gilber & Allen, 1998, in Rasmussen, 2005).

The watchman in “Fuse” has all the features of the borderline style. Based on the mythical subtext, he is caught between his loyalty to the king and his obedience to the queen. In the suspense-ridden situation he is, he finds neither one supportive enough to rely on for his self-image. This gives him a sense of anxiety; his fragmented sentences, jumping from one topic to another, his disordered speech and constantly interrupted line of thought, all can be taken as signs of his anxiety that he feels in himself. While on watch, he is preoccupied by the stars up in the sky, which he knows by heart; but his attention is immediately diverted to a rosebush rising from below toward his feet. He uses “toxic” terms:

Always drowsy. Never spelled. (Graham, 2000, p. 80)

Terms “always” and “never” both reflect his dichotomous thinking, just as his attention is both to the sky high up and the rosebush down below. The same sense of unpredictability is felt in his restlessness:

. . . prowling my glance

from open face to open face (Graham, 2000, p. 81)

The watchman is irritable as he oscillates between states of wake and dream:

Also sometimes a dream but always leaping

(to stay awake) towards explanation (Graham, 2000, p. 81)

He is envious:

I try to learn from it [the rosebush] disinterestedness. (Graham, 2000, p. 80)

He is sullen and pessimistic:

always me here knowing

dew, patience, terror somewhere in my back (Graham, 2000, p. 81)

He is complaining and disgruntled:

voice filling every step of the long breath of course but it

still not full,

soul in it too but it still not satisfied,

link by link the thing wanting to vanquish

wakefulness, (Graham, 2000, p. 83)

He feels empty and void:

Looking up, stars: when I am empty must I still

be? (Graham, 2000, p. 84)

Finally, he has suicidal ideation and takes suicidal gesture:

I see someone else becoming me

A shadow becoming me

Disfigurement of the outline-me (Graham, 2000, p. 83)

The personological analysis of the watchman evinces he is a chaotic figure who is wandering on the borderline of self and other. This personality sounds fit within the linguistic and textual turbulence the poem has.

### *Complexity and Order*

“Fuse” in fact fuses states of stability with instability, certainty with hesitation, wakefulness with dream; and, in such fusing, it dismantles the linguistic norms syntactically, semantically, and graphologically. However, one cannot discard the poem as a mere set of fragmented words and expressions put on page. There are some factors that impose sort of order on the text. The most important of these factors is the mythical subtext. Allusions to *Agamemnon* provide the disintegrated text with some points to get it pinned down to a specific situation: the situation of a watchman who is torn between loyalty and betrayal, just as he is hanging

somewhere between stars and the earth (rosebush). The other cementing factor that prevents “Fuse” from running into absurdity is the numbering of its stanzas. The stanzas are chaotic in language, and differ in length; but they are strung together with the help of numbers, which identify the territories of each stanza, although some stanzas run into the following one linguistically. The numbering of the stanzas also has a thematic processual order. The sequence of the stanzas is based on the sequence of the incidents in the mythical subtext. The first stanza is the beginning of the mythical story; the second one is controlled by images of war, fire, and the anticipation of a future event; the third stanza relates the arrival of the news of victory the joys of which are poisoned by the anticipation of revenge at home for the conqueror. With the fourth stanza comes the paradoxical situation of the victorious king at home; and, the final stanza reaches the state of death:

Yes, death’s game: outsidenedness. (Graham, 2000, p. 84)

Thus, “Fuse” commingles the chaotic with the static. Read through the chaos/complexity theory, one can claim the mythical subtext and the Arabic numbers are attractors that impose sort of order on the chaos of the poem.

### **Discussion and a Different Reading**

The all-embracing analysis of Graham’s poem, “Fuse,” shows that it is chaotic in all respects. The linguistic, textual, and personological chaos the poem creates puts the reader in a turbulent state. Like the watchman, the reader oscillates between the fixity of norms and words and their de-definitions, between states of wakefulness and dream, between the postmodern era and the ancient world of mythical gods and goddesses.

In semantic analysis of the poem, it has been mentioned the poem evolves out of a pun the watchman plays on the word “sentence.” The analysis has also provided the supportive terms and words for each of the two meanings of “sentence.” Reading the whole poem in the light of the second meaning of “sentence” makes the text tilt more toward its mythical subtext and it, thus, gives it a more literal semantic value. He takes his assigned mission as his long-term and exhausting sentence, because he is confined to the mountain-top till he witnesses the signal of the king’s victory. In this sense, the affinity between the postmodern text and its subtext is enhanced. However, viewed in the light of the verbal meaning of “sentence” estranges the postmodern text more and more from its mythical base. The “watchman” turns into a “watchword” who filled by anxiety and uncertainty draws on the unpredictability of the language system. It seems as if he knows the void of his own verbal identity and, thus, from the very beginning apologizes to the reader: “Forgive the absurdity” (Graham, 2000, p. 80). The first meaning of “sentence” gives a more figurative dimension to the poem.

The images Graham fuses in the poem remind us of the poststructuralist Roland Barthes's views on language and its terrorizing impact. Away from its mythical subtext, the watchman tells how a "sentence" condemns one to "outsidedness," no matter how much "a master" has been fighting for and/or toward "total objectivity." The notion of "total objectivity" in language discourse means avoiding subjectivity, namely, retaining matter-of-factness and authenticity. In language studies, total objectivity is impossible because no utterance is innocent and impartial. This renders the fight of the so-called "master" void. There is no escape from subjectivity, as sentence is "so filled with deferral" (Graham, 2000, p. 82).

The whole poem can be read in the light of how a sentence is created. The first stanza provides the situation and implies the urge to "drive a point home." In the second stanza, there is a fight for selecting the proper words that convey total objectivity and explanation. The third stanza gives the words a syntax, marks them with a "tense with outstripping thought/ with the hot face of proof—idea" and "a meaning." In the fourth stanza, the speaker is not satisfied with the sentence as it is full of deferral, "built on forgetting word by word how life/feels" (Graham, 2000, p. 82). Thus, the speaker demands a voice for "a finishing-out/altogether/of thought" (Graham, 2000, p. 82). The listener is "weary of arrival"; and the speaker gets the "arrival-point, meaning" but knows quite well that it smacks of "murder" growing "in the human heart"; he wonders, "how strange that it must come from the mouth" (Graham, 2000, p. 83). The last stanza relates death of the speaker/subject, which dissolves in the words he has just uttered. The last stanza tells the fact that "One hears a little of what one hears," because many things remain unsaid in utterances.

## Conclusion

The present article has attempted to analyze Graham's post-modern poem through the lens of chaos/complexity theory. The terminology provided by this theory has helped explaining and justifying the many experiments the poet has carried out on different aspects of the poem. The other advantage of the methodology has been the systematic way it proposes to analyze a literary text. It encourages to seek strange attractors, which disrupt the order of the poem's system and then look for cementing order that prevents the poem from total explosion into nothingness. The other advantage of the theory is its emphasis on the observer as a participant agent in the course of events. This feature has encouraged the researcher to include a personological analysis of the speaker of the poem. The chaotic world created in the poem provides a reader with a space to have his or her own interpretation of the poem, which is neither more right nor wrong than any other's.

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