

Decline And Fall

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1. ABSTRACT

Decline and Fall is a new Storyspace hypertext fiction, a school story based loosely on *The Trojan Women*. It sets out to be an exciting hypertext, a potboiler: a hypertext in which things happen, while remaining within the tradition of literary hypertext.

CCS Concepts

• Software and its engineering → Software creation and management → Designing Software • Applied Computing → Computers in other domains.

Keywords

Storyspace, hypertext, hypermedia, literature, fiction, education, design, implementation, support, history of computing, maps, links.

2. ARTIST'S STATEMENT

Decline and Fall sets out to be an exciting hypertext, a hypertext in which things happen.

Early hypertexts were not, for the most part, greatly interested in excitement [2]. This was neither a mistake nor a vice; the important task facing hypertext was to achieve what print could not, to discover what lies beyond the electronic imitation of the codex book. The writers of the 1980's and 1990's could readily look back a hundred years to find wonderful explorations of the narrative line. That we could manage Gardner's perfluent dream seemed sure [6]; whether we could break the line and still find meaning in a life without the illusion of God and the myth of Romance seemed doubtful.

Potboilers and page-turners may not, indeed, have been the most pressing concern of literary hypertext, but a generation has now passed. The summer is over, and we cannot say with great confidence that we know how to write an exciting hypertext that is not a game. Games are fine things, but their excitement substantially stems from the reader's agency (however problematized) and the promise (however symbolic) that one might win. *Decline and Fall* is not a game, at least not beyond the extent to which any storyteller and any self-aware reader can be said to be playing a game [11]. The plot (that is, the way the underlying story is told) is likely to be different in each reading, but we begin roughly where *The Trojan Women* begins, after the fall of Troy¹. The reader has no agency in the story world. No man and no god could prevent that fall, nor can all your piety and wit cheer up Cassandra or rescue Polyxena, soon to be the bride of dead Achilles.

2.1 The School Story

Troy has fallen but work remains: there are crops to plant, forms to fill out, taxes (and hell) to pay, and exams to pass. *Decline and Fall* opens as people who survived the conflict—school teachers and their privileged and sheltered students—go about the business of the world. Things have changed: some of the kids have lost a parent, and many of their parents have lost their money or their jobs or their government post. Quite a few of their former schoolmates are refugees now, or have fled the new government's ethnic

¹ *The Trojan Women*, written by Euripides in 415BC, presents the miseries of Helen, formerly queen of Troy, and of her daughters as they face slavery and worse at the hands of the victorious Greeks. The same events are the subject of Euripides' earlier *Hecuba*. Seneca revisited the story in 54CE. Berlioz turned it into an opera. Charles L. Mee's *Trojan Women: A Love Story* refracts the play through Hiroshima and Holocaust. Mee, like Euripides, sets his play against universal catastrophe, but *Decline and Fall* describes the aftermath of chronic, endemic violence—Vichy, perhaps, or Kigali. It may not be the end of the world but, for Hecuba's daughters, it is catastrophe enough.

cleansing. The former headmaster, too, has been forced to leave the country.

As *The Trojan Women* opens at the end of another story, we do not begin by joining the incoming freshmen. Instead, we join the returning seniors, students whose school days are already nearly behind them. We meet them late their story. They have all known each other for years. They know each other's secrets, or at least imagine that they do: they know about Linnea's unaccountable crush on Trish "Farmgirl" Parker and are very mature about it, just as they know that May Elster, despite her terrific clothes and pearls, has to spend her summers behind the counter of the family shop. They know that Cassie used to be cute and popular, before she went peculiar, three years ago. (They don't yet know that mousy Bri Atkins, of all people, has been sleeping with the Science Master, who is terrified of losing her and of equally terrified of losing his position, and who knows that he will, inevitably, lose both.)

There's a lot going on.

The nineteenth-century school story ends in graduation. The school story of the twentieth century ends with the dissolution of the school. *Decline and Fall* promises a resolution; though it acknowledges that closure is a suspect quality, it's also a pleasure, one from which we need not forever abstain. One way or another, this darkness got to give.

2.2 "I've Got A Bad Feeling About This"

Decline and Fall spirals around Hill Academy, an instance of the elite secondary school familiar from Tom Brown to Harry Potter. Much is familiar; we have Houses and arcane rules, we have prefects and masters and sporting matches with other schools. Some of the students are rich. Some have titles.

And yet, things are not quite right, either, for these are not the playing fields we know. The political situation (about which everyone talks obliquely) matches nothing in English history or any plausible alternate history. A revolt or uprising has taken place, followed by the arrival of peacekeepers and the creation of new institutions with insidious echoes – a People's Provisional Court, a paramilitary outfit called The Security. There's a war on, in the East, and some of our kids have older siblings who have been conscripted.

In this way, in addition to the desires and the fears of a substantial cast of students and their teachers, the world itself offers narrative thrust.

2.3 Allusive Pleasures

Simply amassing suspense, perhaps occasionally punctuated with bathos or humor, might leave us with only a feeble entertainment. Because hypertext is inherently reflective – the reader, after all, must choose the links they want and so must consult their own preferences – a merely melodramatic hypertext might compete with difficulty with immersive media like theater, film, or narrative painting.

Decline and Fall uses its dependence on *The Trojan Women* and other familiar talks to create tension between anticipation of familiar story elements and unfamiliar settings. The head girl of Hill Academy, we learn, is Polly Xena: what is Polyxena doing in our school, what is going to happen to her, and when will it happen? Other elements which seem routine passagework turn out to be allusive; Colonel Wiley is not one of John Wiley's Sons.

2.4 Excitement Without Agency

Games create excitement by offering the reader an opportunity to take a part, promising to let us be Hamlet on the holodeck[10]. I have argued elsewhere that agency is inimical to the spirit of tragedy[1], but here agency is beside the point. We are in school, and though children may take arms against a sea of troubles, we can hardly expect them to oppose tanks and artillery. The outcome is not in our hands or our game controllers.² The only thing our characters have to decide is, what to do with the time that is given them.

If excitement cannot come from the reader's efforts to solve the puzzle or win the war, we can find it in familiar narrative pleasures. Like the Victorian serial novel, we may find energetic springs to propel the reader past the obstacles that the medium (and the distractions of life) place in their way. Some of these include:

- Sympathetic characters who are in trouble, or who do not have the one thing they desperately need.
- A setting that is at once familiar and anomalous, inviting the reader to resolve its discordant elements.
- The promise of a story, offered at the outset and frequently repeated [9].
- An upright world that is turned upside down to create a (literally subterranean) mirrorworld in which children become leaders and authority proves feckless.

² See especially Jason Morningstar's game *The Gray Ranks*, in which the player-protagonists are teenagers trapped in the Warsaw ghetto,

- The gradual and progressive unveiling of the heroine [8], physical or psychological.
- The horror of children at war can become nearly intolerable[4]. If those children also possess ideas – if they think – the conflict of ideas can relieve and redeem the mud and blood[7].

2.5 Challenges

School stories often require a large cast: schools are crowded places. Keeping the characters straight has been challenging. Continuity mishaps – for example, the unexplained appearance in one scene of a character who died is another – are distracting or worse. The new semantics of Storyspace 3 help break cycles and maintain continuity by allowing writing spaces and notes to assert requirements.

Schools, like grand hotels, are places where people are always coming, always going, and where nothing changes[5]. If we relied on mere simulation, the reader would not know where to look: there's a lot happening, a million stories in the naked city.

Hypertext narrative contains four kinds of links: recursus, timeshift, renewal, and annotation[3]. Timeshift is inherent to the first act: once upon a time. Recursus lets us explain how we got into this mess and why we want (or need) what we desire; it is the link of the second act. But renewal is the link of the third act: "there was one thing they had forgotten." This combination of timeshift or recursus leading to renewal is an engine that propels us forward.

The argument for the seriousness of the medium, so central to early hypertexts, has perhaps now been settled. In any case, expectations of electronic media allow us to establish a modicum of seriousness simply in avoiding another captive princess demanding rescue or another Macguffin to be fetched from the dragon. This meant to be a potboiler; it's got to be exciting, and that means the stakes need to matter.

An underlying difficulty, and one which continues to perplex this work, is the struggle between taste and distaste, squeamishness, or revulsion. This is war, and this is hell, and we must not sanitize it with Orwellian euphemism or pretend that magic or the hero's romantic excellence will save them. This is a story about a girl who must die and another girl who is mad. The situation is pathetic. Bathos and sentimentality are ever-present hazards.

3. DESCRIPTION OF THE PIECE

Decline and Fall runs approximately 88,000 words. It's written for Storyspace 3.1, which runs on OS X 10.10 and later.

4. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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