

## The Discrepancy of Meaning: A Study of a Guardian Angel's Existence in "Deus Ex Machina"

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### Abstract

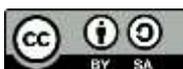
The theme of a guardian angel has always become cryptic discussion among scholars, for as God, she is beyond our empirical grasp. Hari Kunzru is one of the writers who broach this subject in his work entitled "Deus Ex Machina". In the short story, the guardian angel acts as the I-character of the story as well as the I-narrator of the story. By using theories on textual deconstruction and existentialism, we discuss and analyze the guardian angel's *raison d'être* (reason to be) and significance through her functions as the narrator and also the I-character in the narration of "Deus Ex Machina" story. From the analysis, we could draw three conclusions which relate *raison d'être* (reason to be) and the significance of the guardian angel to the other characters within the story and with her readers outside the story.

**Keywords:** guardian angel, deconstruction, discrepancy, hyperreality, existentialism

### Introduction

The theme of a guardian angel has always become cryptic discussion among scholars, for like God, she is beyond our empirical grasp. Many writings contemplate on the theme, wrap it in terms of existence or in its lower level of pragmatics. Such theme appeared in Greek classical tragedies *Eumenides* written by Aeschylus and also in *Alcestis* by Euripides. In both works, the divine intervenes and influences the ending of the stories by helping the protagonist(s). Euripides was known widely as playwright who used a machine to carry actors, lowering or rising the actors, to "get

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the hero out of difficulties or untangle the plot" (Cuddon, 2012). The use of such machine is known as *deus ex machina* or the god out of the machine.

It is very interesting that Hari Kunzru (1999) uses the term for his short story's title "Deus Ex Machina". Unlike the divine characters in Greek classical theaters which uses a machine to rise and lower, the divine characters in Kunzru's realm uses digital space to show her signification within the story. It is as if it is adapting to the world these days. Like the divine in the Greek classical works, Kunzru's also intervenes the life of human characters in the story.

The intervention, according to modern scholars, is ironic and point out the absurdity and the unrealisticness of tragedy by implementing a random and proper ending to the events (Johnston, 2016). Wolfreys, et al (2014) even said that some readers may find the use of such technique in writing shows 'a lack of writerly skills'. However, such opinion may not be true for the short story of "Deus Ex Machina" by Kunzru. This is because the guardian angel appears not only at the end of the story but throughout the story. The dot is connected since the very beginning of the story as the angel signifies herself not only as a character in the story but also as the narrator. Every scene is well related to one and another.

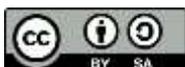
Since Einstein introduced his theory of relativism, the world is reduced to particles, complexly related to each other: there is void leading to the infinitude. As a result, as has been proposed by Derrida (1988), the chain of signification has no *archae* (beginning) as well as *telos* (end), the only thing exists is relativism which very much depends on our stand point. Based on this ground, we assert a proposition that the text of "Deus Ex Machina" contains in itself contradictory signification.

The short story "Deus Ex Machina" which as a text has its own realist form—consists of letters arranged in words, sentences, and paragraphs—immediately construct some limits due to its arrangement of signs, of realist form. The boundaries established by the text are by deconstruction seen intercrossed to each other. However, it is this discrepancy that builds the existence of the text. One of the discrepancies discussed in this writing is the discrepancy of a guardian angel's existence.

In the "Deus Ex Machina", the guardian angel acts as the narrator. This, of course, makes the story more interesting—such point of view from the angle of an angel is always fascinated: anything, whose narration borrows the perspective of that other than human, always is—for it presents the problem of how the angel perceives herself and people in the world of narration that she builds, and also in the bigger world created by her narration: the multi-interpretative world of meaning (in the narrative frame of work the guardian angel acts as the I-character of the story as well as the I-narrator of the story, the story teller who is, of course, subjective).

## Method

In this article, we use textual deconstruction and existentialism to understand and to analyze the narration of the "Deus Ex Machina". In a broad sense, deconstruction which owes very much to Jacques Derrida, means a particular kind of reading critically and therefore a method of criticism (Cuddon, 2012). Derrida in *Of Grammatology*, shows that anything can be a text and it can be read as saying



something quite different from what it denotatively saying. In other words, the text could have various meanings even one that is contradictive than it might seem.

The works of theorists e.g. Jacques Derrida, Jean Paul Sartre, Catherine Belsey, and Julia Kristeva which discuss the significant of this method play important roles in our analysis of “Deus Ex Machina”. Their works help us analyze the boundaries established by the text which intercross to each other. We decided to use deconstruction method because, in a broad sense, it helps us to

... locate the point of contradictions within the text, the point at which it transgresses the limits within which it is constructed, breaks free of the constraints imposed by its own realist form (Belsey, 1986, p. 362).

Based on the above proposition, therefore, we think deconstruction method is suitable to be used to analyze texts like “Deus Ex Machina”. The textual construction of the short story is in itself full of contradictions and its characters’ identities formed through the signification chains which are ambiguous and contradictory to each other.

By using this method, in the beginning of our research, we are aware of the narrative frame of work the guardian angel who acts as the I-character of the story as well as the I-narrator of the story play the central part in “Deus Ex Machina”. Therefore, in the later stage of our research, we use existentialism theory to discuss and analyze the guardian angel’s *raison d’etre* (reason to be) and significance through her functions as the narrator and also as the I-character in the narration of “Deus Ex Machina” story. The phrase *raison d’etre* indicates everything related to reason and being, that is the essence of the guardian angel in terms of its “cause, purpose, direction, necessity, justification, meaning and mission” (Derrida, 1986, p. 321). Through the use of the phrase, we are enforced to examine the causal—as well as diachronic—inquiry of the text’s definitive boundaries concerning the guardian angel.

The next part of this article shows our analysis using the methods to the guardian angel’s functions as the narrator and the main character in the story towards other characters in the story and readers outside the story.

## Findings and Discussion

### *The guardian angel as a character in “Deus Ex Machina”*

When we talk about the position of the angel in the text, narration becomes a significant point because it is through narration that she constructs herself as “subject” which at the same time, her narration also posit herself as an object (as is typical in deconstructive text). It is this subject position that accommodates the existence of the guardian angel in order to be accessible for her narratees and readers.

In the beginning of “Deus Ex Machina” story, a guardian angel is described as an abstract entity, inaccessible, and beyond grasp. It is only through writing that she can be defined and can be subjected. Just like God who should humble and subject Himself through the form of words in order to be accessible for human, an angel then should also humble herself, taking the position of the I in the story, in order to



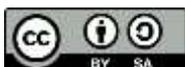
be accessible and become the subject of discussion. Once the guardian angel describes herself and when she refers herself as the I in the story, immediately there is an identity built through the consciousness of signification. In other words, "... a definite subject is present as soon as there is consciousness of signification" (Kristeva, 1992, p. 1163). Interestingly, Belsey (1986) has her own postulation regarding such signification. The identities formed through the signification chains are ambiguous and contradictory to each other.

Talking about the identities of a guardian angel, we have to also talk about *raison d'être* (reason to be) of the angel. In the beginning of her narration, the guardian angel attempts to define herself by displaying definitions made by people:

People say that everyone has a Guardian Angel. I don't object to that. It is the way they say it. The way they use it as a synonym for luck, or some other chance process. I find it demeaning to be reduced to a metaphor. However, given that literal manifestation, spectacular miracles and all the rest of it have been banned since the Age of Reason, what can I do? (Kunzru, 1999, p. 416)

The above quotation indicates that a guardian angel is often used as a metaphor that signifies luck or second chance. A guardian angel, hence, is identical with the "administrator" of good things. Although she doesn't like her reduction into mere metaphor, she is enforced to accept it since she can only *Be* through the manifestation of words. In other words, her existence must be in the form of metaphor, she is substituted by the words like "luck", "chance process", "deva", "household god", "tree-spirit", "fetish" and even "pooka" or "leprechaun" which according to the angel does convey some aspect of what she does. It is the substitution that makes her present and exist. Presence is thus signified by the absence of the guardian angel as an essence. On the essence of a guardian angel, the narrator is himself giving a definition, "I am immaterial, powerful, and quite hands on in my approach" (Kunzru, 1999, p. 416). What we are referring to as essence is the immaterial existence, that is the "*I*" as it is as opposed to the "*I*" as it is perceived. The text "Deus Ex Machina" presents the guardian angel in the manner people perceive it, the presence of "*I*" as it is perceived, then, replaces the presence of "*I*" as it is. Based on Sartre's (1999) idea, the meaning of existence is the construction of relations perceived by a subject. The universe exists when man is willing and able to perceive it. When man ceases to perceive it, the universe will sink back until a consciousness wake it up from the sinking. Furthermore, when the universe ceases to be perceived what will be annihilated is not the universe itself, but the existence of man. When man ceases to perceive the universe, then he ceases to be a subject, and he will be annihilated together with the annihilation of his existence. If we apply this concept to "Deus Ex Machina" then the guardian angel is *Becoming* because she is perceived by other people, by man. It is clear, therefore, why she needs to provide some references from certain scripts.

Otto of Vaocluse, in his *Liber Argentum*, describes my particular host as "somewhere below the archangel but still in the major



dispensation league'. Athanasius Hermeticus, the sage of Dresden, was granted a vision of the whole lot of us while he lay prostrate one day in his cell ... The anonymous thirteenth-century Magister of Mendacia Lingua, author of the *Dictum Sapientiae*, gives my actual name, which I am not currently at liberty to reveal (Kunzru, 1999, p. 417).

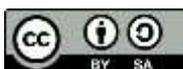
The above references mentioned by the angel act as if to validate her existence. Such references enable her to be "present" in the world of narration, because they indicate that she can be accessed by the objects in her narration: other characters in the same narrative frame. The problem of presence and absence will become more complicated when we start to relate it with the *raison* (reason) which causes the *être* (presence). One of the roles and functions of the guardian angel is to protect a girl named Christina.

So, I looked after Christina. Just Christina. I find my purpose in the vast, almost luminous love I bear for her, a love which is, in its turn, just a reflection of the same implausibly humungous love which God bears for her as He bears for every living thing (Kunzru, 1999, p. 418).

By looking after Christina, by giving her love, the guardian angel reflects the love of God. Essentially, the existence of the guardian angel engenders on a mission, that is to give service for the people she is guarding.

[People] get excellent service. And there is a logical method to the assignment of angels. However, it is the Deity's method, and manifesting His filing system is something God is particularly averse to doing (Kunzru, 1999, p. 418).

There is a particular method to "assign" the guardian angel, and not only that, the guardian angel herself has a particular method to run her duty. In Christina's case, for example, the narrator is obliged to help her in preserving her life, to prevent her from doing suicide. In accomplishing her duty, the angel—narrator—manifests herself by utilizing the help of the other "Omnipotence": the machine (computer). This is, in our opinion, what foreground the creation of the title "Deus Ex Machina". In Latin the word *deus* literary means god, while the word *machina* is the Latin root of English 'machine'. It can be inferred thus that *deus ex machina* literary means god in machine. The phrase *deus ex machina* has often been used by philosophers like Aristotle (1986) in his "Poetics" and Horace (1986) in his "Art of Poetry" to refer to god and the Divine from the ideal world, from whom man derives his knowledge and truth. It is previously believed that the *deus ex machina* often intervenes in the unrevealing of the plot and in the events of the drama. The utilization of machine, in this case computer, in the narration is significant because it deals with topics—cyber space, transcendentalism, reality, and of course, identity—that will build the discrepancy of meaning, the core of our analysis.



The utilization of computers by the guardian angel is made possible by the crisis undergone by Christina. It is told that Christina was just dumped by her boyfriend—Robert, a poet—and is trying to suicide in her friend's apartment by drinking overdosed pills. From the very beginning, Christina is described as having problems with her existence; she is always lack of self-confident and always deals with wrong persons.

[Christina] spends most of her day doubting, racking herself with worry over her talent, her looks, her future prospects. Recently she has been racking herself over her relationship with a man called Robert, who is worthless and has made her very unhappy (Kunzru, 1999, p. 419).

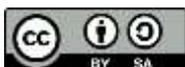
From the quotation above, it is clear that the guardian angel keeps her eyes on Christina. She knows exactly how Christina feels about something and also about her unhappy relationship. To look after Christina, it is through the utilization of computers, the guardian angel is able to show her signification as a character in the story. Therefore, the angel can present herself as "*I*" as *it is* in the story. In other words, by utilizing the computers, the angel is able to make herself presents as an angel character who looks after Christina, a human character.

#### ***The guardian angel as a narrator in "Deus ex Machina"***

The narration does not tell us whether the angel has taken part in Christina's development to be the person she is to be, since most of the narration is about the present time. In narrating the story, the narrator mostly uses present tense, sometimes even in future tense. She is only using past tense when she refers to past event, indicating her involvement only as a passive observer. However, when she speaks of Christina who is swallowing Halcyon pills, she indicates her involvement. This shows that she is waiting for the right moment to come into Christina's life.

In performing her duty, that is to give helps, the angel must firstly make herself comprehensible, make herself more sensible than a miracle. She must cleverly arrange all the assistance. It is then that she restricts herself to moving things not larger than electrons. In this world of advanced and technical culture, people hardly believe in miracles, thus it is the duty of the angel to help them through the aesthetics play of semiconductor-base. One thing that can be the medium is a personal computer (PC). In the modern world, PC is the real center of "supernatural" activity. By a bit operation of algorithm calculation here and there, the angel manages to alter zero digits into one and one digits into zero. The result is she successfully "brings" a property agent and a buyer candidate to the flat which eventually helps Christina avoiding her death.

The utilization of machine by the narrator (who is also the guardian angel) is important because it enables the angel to be present but also keeps the angel being transcendent at the same time. The cyber space which Piliang (1999) defines as a space created digitally in the form of bites of information which produces experiences of hallucination, helps the angel to do so. The use of the cyber space also enables the process of Divinity-like which eliminates the earthly traces



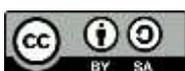
(Slouka, 1995, p. 66). It means that in cyber space, the material bases have been destroyed and are no longer significant: a subject can alter identity, anytime, anywhere; reality loses its meaning; the boundaries of space have been terminated, and so have the community.

The guardian angel with all her *raison d'être* must be present to help Christina, but her essence prohibits her from having a bodily presence, from having material existence. She must keep being immaterial and transcendent. She must be present but her presence must not be “real” for Christina. Cyber space, in this case, gives a solution. In cyber space, nothing is real, “reality is only a customization, a way of thinking. Everything is nothing but information” (Slouka, 1995, p. 61). In “Deus Ex Machina”, Suzie, the property agent does not question the “slight change” done by the angel to her digital agenda, and neither does Yukio, the prospective flat buyer whose personal digital organizer has been also changed. They might not realize of the “slight change,” they fully trust the information appeared on their monitor screen. If only they trust their memory better, they might be aware of something odd.

Suzie and Yukio propitiate their machines, asking for fault-tolerance, viral absence and continued bug-free living and working. When dealing with the divine, human fallibility is thrown into sharp relief, so neither of the two has thought to question whether their computer has ‘got it right’. They just obeyed (Kunzru, 1999, p. 423).

For those who live in digital culture, as are other cyberists, what appears on the screen is what is real, even though it is the illusive appearance of the artificial world. The countenance of the world, for the cyberists, turns into mere appearances on the screen. On the total and simultaneous change of the world’s (and also culture’s) appearance and countenance, Baudrillard (1983) categorizes it into three stages, that are (1) *counterfeit*, marked by the free production of sign, fashion, model which replace the repressive and hegemonic signification system of caste or clan, (2) *production*, marked by the automatization of production and universalism of values, and (3) *simulation*, marked by the controls of codes, a phase which is dominated by reproduction of artificial reality—hyper-reality. The reality appeared in “Deus Ex Machina” has already been in Baudrillard’s third phase, i.e. simulation, where reality is controlled by codes. According to Piliang (1999), the world of simulative appearance is marked by the confusion, abusive use, and piracy of signs in representation and language. The abusive use and piracy of signs in the narration is done by the guardian angel.

I altered the charge of half a dozen selected spots on a tiny sliver of treated silicon in the Central Processor Unit of a PC which sits on the desk ... My little nudge set off, domino-like, a cascade of instructions that made a single minor alteration to Suzie’s diary software. This morning, she arrived at work to find that an appointment she remembered as being for mid-afternoon was in fact scheduled for early morning. She found she would have to stay late



at work and show Mr. [Yukio] Harakami the flat at seven tonight  
(Kunzru, 1999, p. 423).

This concept of the piracy of signs done by the angel in order to alter Suzie's memory reminds us of the concept of deconstruction which basically also destroy signs. Slouka (1995) states that the focus of deconstruction is the unreliability of language, the uncertainty of text. The information system that builds the digital language and signs in computers, as described in "Deus Ex Machina," can be altered into unreliable and uncertain signs. In this case "cyber space has made possible the marriage between deconstruction and computer technology. If the deconstructionist has the theory, the cyberist has the machine. The cyberist's machine can be seen as applied deconstruction. "Deus Ex Machina" with all its reference to machine (as suggested by the title) offers an application of deconstruction of a guardian angel's existence.

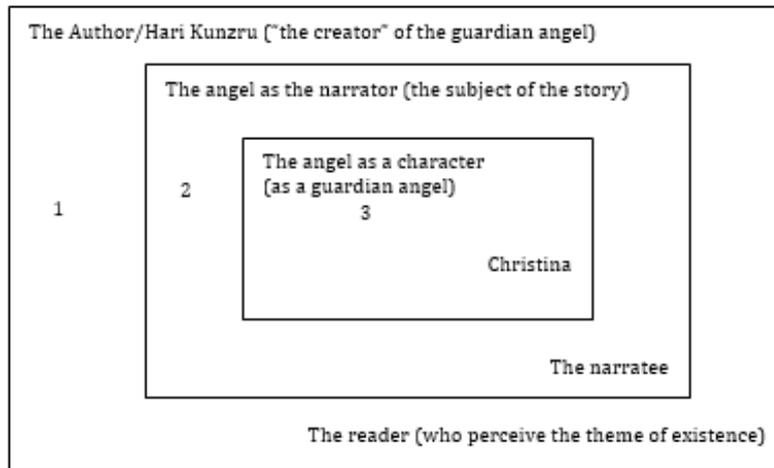
As a narrator in "Deus Ex Machina", the angel firstly shows her signification through words describing what a guardian angel as perceived by people. She also provides references to various old scripts like *Liber Argentum* which describes her host as "somewhere below the archangel but still in the major dispensation league". The identity of the guardian angel perceived by the people and also the old scripts signifies her present in the story. However, with all her *raison d'être*, her essence prohibits her from having a bodily presence or having material existence. She must keep being immaterial and transcendent to perform her duty. She must cleverly arrange all the assistance. It is then that she restricts herself to moving things not larger than electrons. Therefore, the utilization of computers in the story by the narrator is important because it enables the angel to be present but also keeps the angel being transcendent at the same time.

### ***The discrepancy of the guardian angel's existence***

The title "Deus Ex Machina" has a significant role, not only referring to its literal meaning as has been explained above, but also to its archaic meaning. It can be interpreted that the title refers also to the mechanical method in which the angel manages to turn difficult situation into beneficial medium for her existence. What she does to make herself exist are so technical and methodic that she plays as the deus ex machina in Aristotelian and Horacian concept: she is the god that always intervenes with the plot and internal events of the story; she technically goes into the machine.

The text "Deus Ex Machina," in its bigger narrative frame, can be examined by using deconstruction method. Therefore, we will perceive the text as already complete and self-sufficient, since it is as if the urge of every entity in the text to be present to itself in a way that makes it self-confirming, and self-sufficient (Fowler, 1987, p. 54). Every entity in the text, one of which is the guardian angel, will make herself self-confirming and self-sufficient, in this case the angel will reinforce her existence. While she is reinforcing her existence, she manifests herself through the story-telling process—where she becomes the narrator and at the same time the subject of the story—and also through the helps she gives to Christina. To make it clearer, please look at the chart of story-frame below to differentiate the position of the guardian angel in different layer or frame.

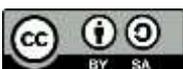




In this article, we only discuss the second and the third frame. The first frame is not discussed because it does not involve the guardian angel. In the second frame, the angel becomes a narrator who—as discussed previously—attempts to manifest herself through her narration. Her narration makes her exist: the entire story is hers. She becomes the subject because she creates a world, the story of her existence. To become subject, she must be dominant and becomes the center of the story. Therefore, she must degrade other centers to the periphery. It is understandable then why in the story she puts Christina as an object that is Christina becomes the medium through which the angel can manifest her existence (she exists because she helps Christina). During the narration Christina is always marginalized, never given portion to talk on her own manner. Christina always appears through the angel’s description. In other words, the angel always does the dubbing for Christina. The building of the text through such a narrative technique, of course, denies Christina’s existence. However, as it is unique in deconstruction approach, “the language will also carry traces of its repressed other, of the un-thought” (Fowler, 1987, p. 55). In “Deus Ex Machina”, the traces of the repressed, in this case Christina, also appear. Even though the narration seems to deny the voice of Christina and otherwise strengthens the angel’s existence through her “dubbing”, interestingly, the narration also shows how fragile the existence built by the angel is.

The angel’s existence is very much dependent on the presence of Christina who has been made absent through the “dubbing” process. However eager the angel marginalizes Christina in her narration, the text has to still carry and mention Christina’s name. If there were no Christina that should be *guarded*, the angel would not be a *guardian* angel, and she would not have a story to tell. Such tracing shows that the text created by the narration builds transgressed meanings. There is contradiction that shadows the text’s coherence and expresses the force of a desire, and there is an attempt of undermining from within (Fowler, 1987, p. 55).

On the third frame, the guardian angel functions as a character in the story. She plays as a character who has the ability to change someone’s life through the alteration of computer’s digits. By focusing on the utilization of computer we are led notice to the guardian angel’s power. Through her ability to manipulate algorithm data, the angel can obscure the meaning of reality. Here, the meaning



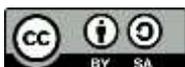
between what's real and what's unreal transgresses each other. While the narration makes the angel real, her transcendence makes her unreal. This is where the discrepancy of angel's existence lies.

According to Shelden and Widdowson (1993), "[p]eople desire a center because it guarantees being as presence" (p. 144). Therefore, in discussing the discrepancy of angel's existence, we have to determine the center of the situation to be aware what presents in the text. By centering the story to what is real, then what is real—in the third frame, that is the layer of the narration—is Christina's existence. This is, of course, based on the definition that the real is visible, made of flesh and blood. On the contrary, the guardian angel is unreal for she is immaterial. However, according to Derrida in Culler (2007), "[t]he real supervenes is added only in taking meaning from a trace or an invocation of supplements" (p. 106). Thus, the real is only the substantial signification, marked by the presence of its supplement, i.e. the unreal. Therefore, we can say "Deus Ex Machina" deconstructs the material meaning of the real into another complex form of the real. In the narration, the center of the real shifts from Christina to the angel. This can be seen from the "disappearance" of Christina: even though she is "real" but she is also inaccessible, and can only be present through the narration (the dubbing) of the angel. By centering on the angel, we can perceive that the "real"-ity is substituted by the supplement of machine and other's presence. Through the computer and the cyber space created, the angel builds her reality. Even though the reality is, adopting Baudrillard's term, hyperreality, still the angel is present. We cannot say that the helps she gives to Christina is unreal. The ending of the story indicates the saving of Christina, and that means—if the narration is reliable—through whichever medium the existence is, something is "present" to guard Christina.

Even though, in the ending of the story, the ones who present are Suzie and Yukio, their presence represents the presence of the guardian angel. That Yukio represents the angel is clearly seen from this quotation:

I hope [Yukio] realizes he is a lucky man. He is being given an opportunity. His face will be the first thing Christina sees when she wakes up. To her, it will look like the face of an angel (Kunzru, 1999, p. 426).

Referring to the last sentence of the quotation above, Yukio's face is seen by Christina as the face of an angel. In this case, Yukio is Christina's "guardian angel". His presence represents the presence of the "real" guardian angel. In other words, Yukio is the supplement that substitutes the angel. In this frame of mind, the border of the real and unreal is obscure. As stated by Slouka (1995), "meanings are temporary, a text is only a subversion of itself" (p. 67). No matter how hard the angel attempts to be present and makes herself real, she is still bodiless and immaterial. However real her helps are that she can save Christina, the angel is still unreal and inaccessible by Christina.



## Conclusion

In conclusion, there are three things, at least, that we can draw from our analysis above which relate *raison d'être* (reason to be) and the significance of the guardian angel with the other characters within the story and with her readers outside the story.

First, the angel's existence is real as both a narrator and a character in "Deus Ex Machina". Therefore, the angel's narration is real for her narratees and for her readers as well. Second, the angel is also real as "I" as it is perceived by the people or other characters in the story and as "I" as it is in the story. However, these "realities" will not be possible unless someone functions to be guarded by the so-called guardian angel. This situation then leads to the third conclusion. Third, although the angel has the ability to change someone's life and can even marginalize Christina's position in her narration, her existence will never be central and has no significance within the realm of "Des Ex Machina" without Christina's existence and her function as someone to be guarded. In other words, without such conditions, the so-called guardian angel has no reason to exist (*raison d'être*) because she would not have someone to be guarded and then there would be no story to tell. This leads us back what has been stated in the beginning of this article that the chain of signification has no *archae* (beginning) as well as *telos* (end) and that the boundaries established by the text intercross to each other. However, it is this discrepancy that builds the existence of the text; the discrepancy of meaning of the guardian angel's existence.

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