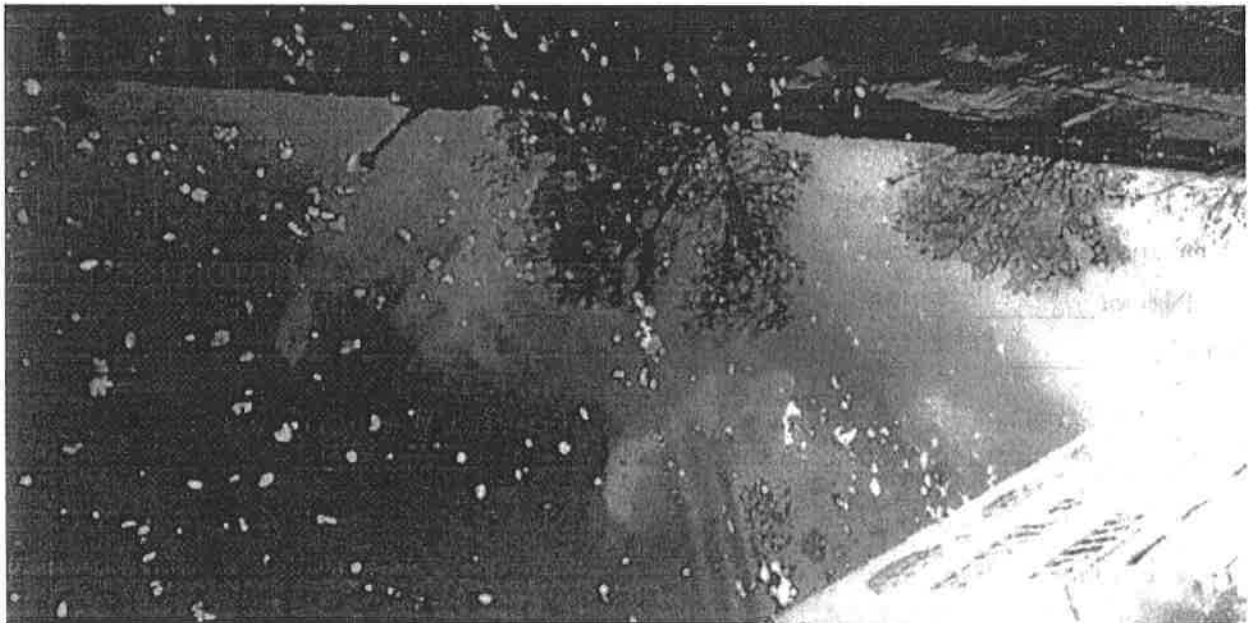


# Teaching: Stranger Than Fiction with Will Ferrell & Emma Thompson

This examines literary elements and ideas in *Stranger Than Fiction* starring Will Ferrell, Dustin Hoffman, and Emma Thompson: symbolism, foils and more.

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*Stranger Than Fiction* starred Will Ferrell and Emma

- Thompson along with Dustin Hoffman and Maggie Gyllenhaal. The movie, written by Zach Helm and directed by Marc Forster, features Ferrell as Harold Crick, an IRS agent, who starts hearing a voice in his head narrating his life.

## **Deconstructing the Voice Through Literature**

To find out whose voice this is, he visits a therapist who tells him he's schizophrenic and he visits a literary professor, Jules Hibbert (Hoffman), at a college. They begin to explore the literary consequences of the voice.

They explore different type of literature together, but it comes down to whether Crick's life is that of a comedy or tragedy.

Encyclopedia Britannica defines a tragedy as:

“Drama of a serious and dignified character that typically describes the development of a conflict between the protagonist and a superior force (such as destiny, circumstance, or society) and reaches a sorrowful or disastrous conclusion.”

Usually in a tragedy, as Hibbert points out, the hero dies. He has to die. Or is his life a comedy where Crick is presented with a host of obstacles, but everything works out in the end? Through the film, Crick vacillates between thinking his life is a tragedy or a comedy.

## **Symbolism: The Watch in *Stranger Than Fiction***

The voice personifies Harold's watch saying that the watch can actually tell what's going on in Harold's life and can actually change his life. In a sense, and we find out later, his watch can change Harold's life drastically. This watch, like all our watches and timepieces, mark the seconds, minutes, and hours in our lives until our death. The watch is the timekeeper in Harold's life.

## **The Voice in Will Ferrell's Mind**

The voice in his head, he finds out, is that of author Karen Eiffel. One message we see in the film that the characters that a writer creates do come to life in many cases. *In Stranger Than Fiction*, this happens quite literally. Whenever Eiffel writes about Harold Crick, whatever she writes happens to him. She finally realizes this when she types: "The phone rang" and the phone rang.

Recently, a writer, Tina Field Howe, spoke to my creative writing class. A student asked if it was hard to kill off characters. The answer can be seen in *Stranger Than Fiction*. Yes, according to Karen Eiffel, it is hard to kill off a character when they seem real or become real.

## **Conflict: Death and Love**

Crick faces conflict from the moment he hears the voices in his head. He wonders if he's going crazy, but realizes he is not when the voice says "Little did he know." This third person

omniscient shows him that the voice is not him. The voice provides more conflict when the voice states that Crick will die.

The other main source of conflict stems from Crick growing desire for Ana Pascal (Maggie Gyllenhaal). Pascal is completely opposite of Crick. They are foils.

## **Foils: Will Ferrell and Maggie Gyllenhaal**

Ana Pascal (Gyllenhaal) is a foil for Harold Crick (Ferrell). A foil contrasts another character (usually the protagonist) to highlight features of that other character's personality, spotlighting these characteristics.

Crick is a stereotypical IRS man. He's rigid and does everything by the numbers, literally. Everything is black and white to him. You either pay your taxes or you don't. Pascal is the opposite. She purposely does not pay her taxes as a form of protest. She gives food from her bakery to the poor without deducting it from her taxes. To Crick, these acts are not logical. Her relaxed outgoing personality makes Crick's personality seem even more uptight and repressed.

## **Transformation of Harold Crick**

After meeting Ana Pascal and facing death, we see Crick transform from an uptight, by the book IRS agent to a person who is willing to follow his emotions rather than the IRS client handbook. And why not? Pascal tugs at his heart while the thought of dying soon puts him in the now.

- We see Crick play the guitar and sing. We see him bring *flours* to Pascal, which breaks the client/agent rules. His appearance changes as well. Instead of being neatly dressed, he wears his shirt half tucked in.

These are just a few literary elements and ideas from *Stranger Than Fiction*. Please look for more elements and let me know of others.

