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Time Loops in Young Adult Fiction

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Table of Contents

1. Introduction

"And if the past and the future
are never actually experienced,
they are only thought about,
and that thought about the past
and the future is always now,
if this past and future are never experienced,
what does that say about time?"
Rupert Spira

Narratives involving some form of time manipulation have fascinated humans for ages. From the incredibly popular and long-running series *Doctor Who* (since 1963) to *Groundhog Day* (1993) and *The Time Traveler's Wife* (2003), no matter if the story is about time travel, alternative timelines, or time loops, rethinking and exploring time in fiction has never gone out of style. It is therefore not surprising that these narratives usually found in the science fiction or fantasy genres have recently found their way into one of the most popular literary genres of the twenty-first century: young adult fiction.

Time loop narratives especially fascinate readers because they explore how the same time span can be experienced in many different ways – an experience that real life does not offer. Time loop narratives especially fascinate readers because they explore how the same time span can unfold in various ways – something they can not experience in their own lives.[1] This fascination is not surprising as "[i]t can be postulated that playfulness and learning from mistakes, as well as what if - scenarios are typical to the human condition and games and films offer different ways to express and explore that" (Lahdenperä 2018: 161). In 2020 alone, there has been the release of Netflix's *Love Wedding Repeat* (2020), a film in which a group of children randomly shuffling place cards on a wedding table creates wildly different outcomes, as well as the German film *Hello Again – Ein Tag für immer* (2020), in which protagonist Zazie is stuck in a loop trying to stop the wedding of her childhood friend. Time loop narratives are not only popular as books or films: NME.com reported rumors about a possible *Groundhog Day* TV show that is set to take place 30 years after the

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1   The loop you experienced while reading this is intentional.

original film, and video game developer Arkane Studios is planning a 2021 release for their aptly titled game *Deathloop,* in which two assassins are stuck in a time loop killing each other, advertising the game with the slogan "If at first you don't succeed... die, die again." These examples show that people's fascination with time loop stories has never wavered, regardless of whether these stories are told via the medium of film, literature, or video games.

This thesis seeks to explore how the mechanic of a time loop acts inside young adult fiction. To achieve this, we will first take a look at time loops on the mechanical level and examine the different ways in which a time loop begins, ends, and resets. In this basic mechanic, I make the distinction between time-based and event-based time loops, which are categorized by the trigger of the looping itself and show similarities to other popular media such as theater and video games. After introducing and explaining these aspects of a time loop mechanic, we will use three recently published young adult novels involving time loops and examine the time loops within these narratives according to these aspects. The novels I have chosen are Lauren Oliver's *Before I Fall* (2010), Jessica Brody's *A Week of Mondays* (2016), and Marisha Pessl's *Neverworld Wake* (2018). All three novels are written by U.S. women authors, feature a first-person narration by a female teenage protagonist, and were published in the last decade. The novels were not only chosen for their genre and recency but also because they have a realistic setting, making the time loop the only fantastical aspect of the narrative.

After examining the three chosen works on the time loop level, I will analyze their narrative perspectives using categories established by Gérard Genette and show how these narrative choices shape the way the story is experienced by the reader. In the following part of my thesis I will argue that time loop narratives in the genre of young adult fiction are incredibly successful narratives because the time loop mechanic acts as a catalyst for the building and changing of identity. The mostly young adult readers of these stories have an easier time relating to the teenage protagonists in these stories, which facilitates identification and can lead to a higher level of immersion while reading. Typically, young adulthood is seen as a phase of exploring,

building, and changing identity, during which the young adult is trying to find their place within society, family, and their peer groups. I will show that the addition of a time loop mechanic in these stories accelerates this phase of identity change, which is usually seen as a "long-term process that occurs mainly during specific parts of the lifespan" (Schwartz 2012: 10) and examine the accelerated identity change that the protagonists in the works by Oliver, Brody, and Pessl undergo. Before beginning with the analysis of general time loop mechanics, I will first define the terms *time loops* and *young adult fiction*.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Time Loops

Both time loop and forking paths narratives belong to a group of so-called future narratives that explore the various ways in which the future could unfold and present the reader with the repetition of a particular period of time (Hermann 2011: 147). Even though these two types of narratives share similarities and are often confused with each other, Lahdenperä sees the main difference between a time loop and a forking path in the focalization of the different paths that are explored, meaning from which character's perspective the events in the story are seen (Lahdenperä 2018: 146). While time loop narratives usually offer insight into the protagonist's inner feelings and let readers experience the narrative from their perspective, forking path narratives often keep the reader at a distance, giving the reader a view from the outside looking in or even from above, with the protagonist themselves being unaware that they are part of this narrative. However, Hermann sees the main distinction between time loops and forking path narratives in the fact that time loop narratives "do not present parallel worlds centering on the question of 'what if' but instead follow the linear logic of trial-and-error", while "'[f]orking-path' stories address first and foremost the issue of chance and fate when they offer alternative storylines after a narrative crossroad" (2011: 147-148). He goes on to state that time loop narratives do not have a forking point "because the narrative only develops one storyline, the one of

the protagonist's learning process and transformation" (Hermann 2011: 149). This definition shows that the focus of time loop narratives is not on the possible unfolding of alternative futures or lifetimes but rather on the protagonist's growth and learning process during the loop.

Time loops are not only part of the category of future narratives but also part of a category that Jan Alber calls "unnatural narratives." He defines the term *unnatural* as denoting "physically impossible scenarios and events, that is, impossible by the known laws governing the physical world, as well as logically impossible ones, that is, impossible by accepted principles of logic" (Doležel 1998: 115-116, as cited by Alber 2009: 80). Being stuck in a time loop is not only impossible in the physical world but additionally leads to a general shift in time perception. Being stuck in a time loop shifts the perception of time from a linear to a cyclic concept. The linearity of time is seen as a western notion (Wendorff 1980), with Klein stating that other cultures do not see time as a linear sequence but rather as a cycle. However, Klein emphasizes that the existence of a cyclic view of time does not mean that time itself is cyclic:

> It only means that the same sequence of changes is repeated and thus cyclic. The experience of such change cycles is very natural, on a short scale, as the sequence or (sic) day and night, as well as on a larger scale, as the re-appearance of certain stellar constellations. But this does not mean that the time itself comes and goes. We can count the repetitions. The seventh time, when the sun rises in the east, is not the same time as the twelfth time at which this happens. The twelfth time at which the world is re-created is not the fifteenth time at which it is re-created. What might be identical, are the properties which the world has at these different times. (Klein 2009: 21-22)

Inside the time loop, for everyone else besides the protagonist, time is indeed identical, as it is completely reset at the beginning of every loop, and for them, everything experienced in every iteration of the loop happens simultaneously even though they only remember the last iteration. However, for the protagonist themselves the linearity of time stays mostly intact as the memories of previous loops are retained and they can "count the repetitions." This linear notion of time is a necessary element of time loop narratives as the succession of events allows the protagonist to remember previous iterations of the loop, learn from them, and adapt their behavior to figure out the

6

loop-breaking event (more on that in chapter 3.3). As soon as the loop is broken, the last iteration of the loop usually ends up becoming reality for everyone, and the protagonist's memories of the alternative realities lived inside the loop are the only proof that it happened at all. Now that we have a better understanding of time loops and their influences on a narrative, in the following chapter we will define the term *young adult fiction*.

2.2 Young Adult Fiction

Defining the term *young adult fiction* is not an easy task. Chris Cowe, an English professor specializing in young adult literature, laments that not even universities, which he usually sees as the font of all knowledge, are sure what young adult literature actually is. He goes on to say that some of his colleagues in the English department call the books he reads and studies "kiddie lit". Cowe then shares his own definitions for young adults and young adult literature:

> I consider a "young adult" to be a person old enough to be in junior high or high school, usually grades seven through twelve. I define literature for young adults as all genres of literature published since 1967 that are written for and marketed to young adults. Of course, everyone who works with teenagers knows that many young adults read books marketed above (William Shakespeare, Joseph Conrad, John Grisham) and below (Dr. Seuss, Jon Scieszka, Shel Silverstein) books marketed exclusively to teenagers, but YAL restricts itself to literature *intended* for teenagers. (Cowe 1998: 121)

Cowe's emphasis on the book publisher's marketing to an *intended* audience of teenagers leads to an interesting fact about the actual readers of young adult literature. In 2012, Bower Market Research conducted their biannual study titled *Understanding the Children's Book Consumer in the Digital Age* and found that 55% of "buyers of works that publishers designate for kids aged 12 to 17 - known as YA books - are 18 or older, with the largest segment aged 30 to 44, a group that alone accounted for 28% of YA sales." The study goes on to say that it is not the case that these numbers only stem from adults purchasing these works for teenage readers because 78% of these buyers stated that they are purchasing young adult books for themselves.

With the global success of works like the Hunger Games or Harry Potter series, young adult fiction has long been a mainstay in the book market, often times outselling well-established genres like fantasy and science fiction. However, this popularity is a fairly recent development. In 2001, Chris Cowe reported on young adult fiction's bad reputation and some adults' opinion that young people should only read classics. The critics argue that "the reading and study of anything less than canonized literature handicaps readers' cultural literacy, weakens students' minds, and wastes valuable educational time and resources" (147). Cowe counters the critics' arguments, believing that young adult books "can be used to accomplish the same English and language arts objectives as traditional literature" and names the higher level of relevancy to the lives of young adults as an advantage that helps in overcoming the resistance to reading that afflicts many teenagers (Cowe 1998: 122).

This higher relevancy to the lives of young adults is owed to the fact that those novels "deal with issues [...] including racism, pregnancy, divorce, substance abuse, family conflicts, and political injustice" and therefore "provide a roadmap of sorts for adolescents coping with these issues in real life" (Bean 2003: 638).

Professor of Education Belinda Y. Louie sees young adult literature not only as a roadmap for adolescents but even as a tool of empowerment, saying that "their empathy with the actors draws them into the action," referring to the higher level of identification that is achieved by young adults reading about protagonists their own age. Louie goes on to say that as a result of this empathy and identification, the readers share the protagonist's dilemmas in decision making and wait to see the consequences. "When characters triumph over odds, [...] the adolescent readers are empowered to develop confidence in overcoming barriers in their own lives" (Louie 1992: 53).

Seeing as adolescence is often described as a time of transition, it will be especially interesting to explore how in this time of heightened change protagonists will deal with the urgent need for change that is thrust upon them by the time loop, which will only allow them to "move on" if they have reached a certain objective. Often-times this objective can be defined as saving someone else from death or becoming a better person. Both objectives require immense and immediate change

from the person stuck in the loop – something that usually does not happen overnight or even at all without the pressure of the time loop. The influence time loops have on the identity of young adult protagonists and the lessons the young adult reader can learn from these narratives will be further explored in chapter 5.

3. The Construction of a Loop

The construction and rules of a time loop can differ greatly across narratives and alters their function inside the work and in regard to the plot. The construction of a loop is based on several aspects: How does the loop begin? How long is the time span being looped? Is the looping event-based (i.e. triggered by the occurrence of an event) or time-based (i.e. triggered by a certain amount of time passing)? What constitutes the loop-breaking event? The following chapters aim to examine these aspects of construction on a general level and later on a specific level, examining the three chosen time loop narratives by Oliver, Brody, and Pessl.

3.1 The Beginning of a Loop

In most time loop narratives, the protagonist lives an ordinary life before getting stuck in a time loop. However, there are also stories in which the protagonist is immediately born into a time loop and only comes to this realization after the loop resets for the first time (e.g., Kate Atkinson's *Life after Life*). In some narratives, the protagonist's wish for a second chance leads to a time loop (e.g., *A Week of Mondays*), and in some cases the loop is the result of a curse or enchantment (e.g., *11 Birthdays* by Wendy Mass). Usually, the reason for the beginning of the loop is clouded in mystery, which leaves it up to interpretation for the protagonist and reader alike. Often-times the protagonist initially thinks of a random occurrence, a glitch in the matrix if you will, and during the loop comes to realize that they are on an internal or external quest (more on that in chapter 3.3). The protagonist realizes that they are supposed to achieve something during the loop and tries to find and fulfill this objective, a process which often involves a lot of guesswork.

3.2 The Looping

After the time loop begins, there are different versions of how the looping itself is triggered. This aspect of a loop can be categorized into two different types that I have chosen to call *time-based* time loops and *event-based* time loops. The time span that is being looped is irrelevant to this distinction, as both event-based and time-based loops can involve looping, e.g., a single day or a whole lifetime.

3.2.1 Time-Based Time Loops

The first type of time loop is time-based loops, meaning that the loop resets every time a usually fixed time span has run out. There is no limit to the time span, and it can be as long as an hour, a day, a week, a year, or even longer than that. In some cases, the time span can also be increasing or decreasing, according to the rules of the time loop. The looping of time-based loops is therefore not dependent on a certain action or event, the sole exception being the loop-breaking event that ultimately leads to its end. Time-based loops act like an hourglass that gets turned upside down every time the time span has passed, with every grain of sand going back to its original place, regardless of what happened during this time span. Consequences inside the loop exist only contained inside the time span. Depending on its length, this means that an unintended consequence, e.g., the death of a loved one, is something the protagonist has to live with for as long as it takes for the time span to run out. While consequences inside one iteration of an event-based time loop are also real, the protagonist can actively reset the loop if they know which event or action acts as a trigger and does not have to wait for time to run out.

Stories with time-based time loops often resemble rehearsals for a play in which every reset puts the actors back in their places, ready to restart the same scene again, regardless of what happened during the prior run-through. However, similar to a theater rehearsal, no iteration of the loop the protagonist experiences can truly ever be the same as even living through a rather short loop of twenty-four hours involves a vast number of decisions and actions, none of which can be exactly the same at the exact same time.

Rather, the script of a play gives rise to an indefinite number of stagings and re-hearsals, none of which can or should be an identical reproduction of the previous one. As opposed to the detective story, which works its way through to the 'correct' and definitive version of events, the very existence of theater presupposes that there is no such definitive version, but that plot is always open to modifications and alter-ations in various re-enactments. Theatrical performance derives its raison d'être from the ability of written words to assume ever new shapes and meanings in different stagings and contexts. (Heise 1997: 139)

Heise emphasizes that no theater rehearsal or performance can ever be the same and that there is no such thing as a "correct" or "definitive version of events." The same applies to life itself, no matter if it takes place inside or outside a time loop. Protago-nists stuck inside a time-based loop need to use the time given to them to their ad-vantage to find a way to escape the loop. Living the same time span over and over again often leads to them feeling like they are losing their mind, and the fact that they are the only one who can remember previous loops means that they have only them-selves to depend upon. The protagonist needs to find out which actions and words lead to the loop being broken by playing through every possible scenario that could lead to a positive outcome, while realizing how many or few of these actions are ac-tually in their power to change.
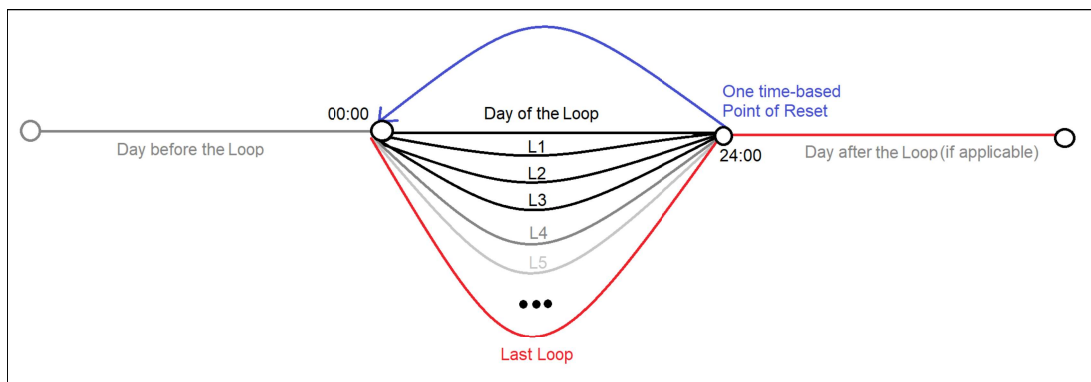

Figure 1: Example of a time-based time loop (time span: one day)

3.2.2 Event-Based Time Loops

The second type of time loop is event-based loops. These loops do not have a fixed length, meaning that the reset of the loop is not triggered by the simple passage of time but rather by the occurrence of a certain event. One example of a narrative in-

volving an event-based time loop is Kate Atkinson's *Life after Life* (2013). In this novel, protagonist Ursula Todd gets reincarnated as herself every time she dies and, as a result, lives her life anew many times over, dying, e.g., during her own birth, at age five, ten, 37, and so on. The event that triggers the looping is, therefore, her own death. Event-based time loops can have internal events (e.g., the protagonist's own death) or external events (e.g., failure to save someone else from dying) as a trigger. Because this type of loop is based on actions and not a time span itself, life inside of the loop shares similarities with video game mechanics, where the failure to achieve an objective restarts the level from the beginning. In the case of external events, this can help the protagonist in finding out what their mission or objective inside of the loop is because the loop resets as soon as the mission has failed.

In event-based loops with internal events, however, the protagonist's objective is not immediately clear: Ursula Todd does not quite remember her past lives but experiences flashes of them that manifest as a feeling of terror whenever she reaches a point in time at which she died in an earlier life. This often helps her escape danger and "progress" forward in her life, similar to how a player in a video game takes extra care when reaching the point in a level at which they previously died. Only some factors of her life are in Ursula's control though, and the progression of her lifespan is not linear. The age at which she dies does not consistently reach a higher number, and she repeatedly lives shorter lives in between in which she dies shortly after her own birth, as a young child, or a young woman. The slow accumulation of knowledge during the different iterations of the loop, however, is not lost and ultimately still helps her find out what her purpose is. Similar to a player progressing in a video game, the "character will live through a specific period of time, and after that time period has ended (or the character has died), she will go back and repeat the same period of time and use what she learnt from previous rounds to change the outcome" (Lahdenperä 2018: 146). This process of gaining knowledge is also similar to a player who learns about a level with every failed play through and then manages to turn this knowledge into a solution.
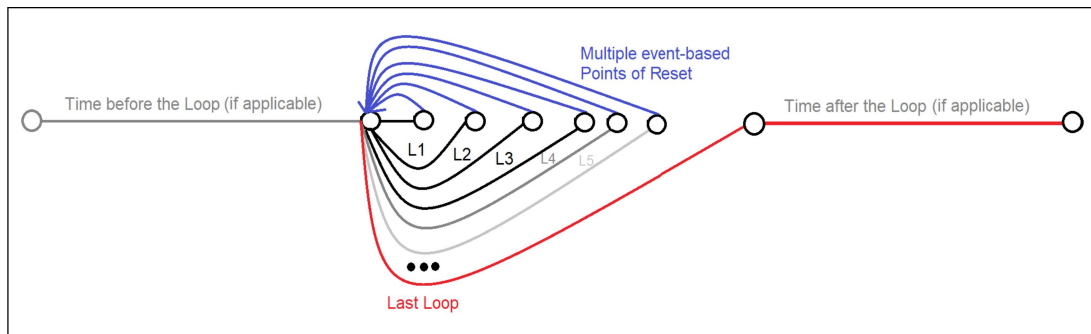
Figure 2: Example of an event-based time loop (each loop longer than the one before)

3.3 The Loop-Breaking Event

Generally, there could be three possible scenarios in regard to the end of a time loop. Firstly, there simply is no end and the protagonist keeps being stuck inside of the loop. Secondly, the loop – regardless of whether it is an event-based or time-based time loop – could simply stop by itself after a certain number of loops and without the protagonist's involvement. Thirdly, the most common and also most satisfying scenario in regard to the narrative is that the loop ends because the protagonist's actions lead to the occurrence of the loop-breaking event. This scenario also places the responsibility to end the loop in the protagonist's hands, whose main purpose becomes figuring out what exactly constitutes the loop-breaking event. If the protagonist succeeds in breaking the loop, the last iteration of the loop usually ends up becoming reality; every previous version of the loop is discarded and, from then on, only exists in the memory of the protagonist who lived through these alternate versions of reality. If the protagonist survives the last loop, it can be assumed that the progression of time in their life will go back to how it was before the loop – with the protagonist(s) being the only person(s) who really changed during the loop. If the protagonist dies during the loop-breaking event, their life ends with this last loop but it can be assumed that the last iteration still becomes reality in the world they leave behind.

Hermann sees time loop narratives as "variations of the quest narrative" (2011: 157), which Schweitzer calls "one of the most basic narrative strategies in all literature" (2005: 645). The protagonist's search for a way out of the loop becomes a

13

quest narrative, with the loop-breaking event either being of an internal or external nature. Hermann provides the well-known time loop film *Groundhog Day* (1993) as an example for an internal quest. In the film, protagonist Phil Connors' time loop "leads him to the insight of what matters in life and how to become a content human being". Furthermore, the loop makes him aware of his disrespectful treatment of the people around him, this realization slowly turning him from "an egocentric 'jerk'" to "a blessing for the people around him" (2011: 158-159). Phil starts to change his behavior, and as soon as he reaches the point where he feels content with his actions, "he automatically breaks the time cycle, which ends his quest. […] As is typical for the internal quester, he "returns to the world as an integrated person" (Clute 1997: 796) and "has become a well-liked community member" (Hermann 2011: 159). In Phil Connors' case his internal quest was the transformation into a respectful and kind human being, colleague, and community member. The completion of this internal quest constitutes the loop-breaking event, similar to how slaying a dragon would constitute the fulfillment of an external quest in a fairy tale or an RPG video game. Instead of searching for a person or an object in the external world, the protagonist who was tasked with an internal quest "embarks upon an internal search" with the goal of gaining self-knowledge (Clute 1997: 796).

Protagonists who are on an external quest often-times also embark on an internal quest at the same time, usually as a byproduct of gaining confidence in the abilities they have to display during it. However, in these cases the internal transformation alone does not constitute the loop-breaking event and, therefore, does not offer an escape from the loop. Protagonists on an external quest are more goal-oriented, focused on actions, and pursue a tangible objective (Hermann 2011: 160).

Now that we have identified the different phases of a loop and established two different categories for triggering the loop, we will examine the time loops of the three chosen works according to these phases and categories.

3.4 Lauren Oliver – Before I Fall (2010)

In Lauren Oliver's *Before I Fall* (2010), protagonist Samantha Kingston and her friends Lindsay, Elody, and Ally attend the party of Samantha's childhood friend Kent, when Juliet Sykes, a girl whom Samantha's group of friends has been bullying for years, shows up and confronts them about their cruel behavior. Later, when Samantha and her friends leave the party in Lindsay's car, they get into a car accident. The car crashes shortly after 12:39 am on Friday night, and even though Samantha dies, she only experiences a falling sensation until she wakes up in her bed at home at 6:50 am on the morning of Friday, February 12th. Only later does Samantha find out that the accident happened due to the fact that Lindsay tried to avoid hitting Juliet, who ran into oncoming traffic to commit suicide.

The loop in *Before I Fall* is ambiguous at first. After the first two days, Samantha assumes that the looping is time-based because the car accident occurred at 12:39 am on both days. To test her theory, she spends the night with her friends at a sleepover instead of going to the party, convinced that the loop will still trigger at the same time. However, it does not and she is able to stay awake until after 1:50 am, assuming that the she managed to break out of the loop. During the sleepover, the friends find out that even though they did not attend Kent's party this time, Juliet Sykes still committed suicide. After receiving the news and the ensuing argument between the friends, Samantha goes to sleep, which triggers the loop again. In subsequent days the loop is also triggered by her falling asleep. From this information it can be concluded that we are dealing with an event-based loop that is triggered by one of two events: Samantha dying or falling asleep.

At the beginning of Samantha's sixth loop she has a realization about the loop-breaking event: "I know now. It was never about saving my life. Not, at least, in the way that I thought" (Oliver 2010: 303). Samantha spent her time in the loop assuming she is supposed to save her own life by preventing the car accident. However, time still loops after she spends the evening at a sleepover with her friends instead of driving to Kent's party. After trying to prevent her own death multiple times but still looping back, Samantha realizes that, following Hermann's earlier definition, she is

on an external quest to save Juliet's life and not her own. The loop-breaking event is, therefore, Samantha sacrificing her life to save Juliet's.
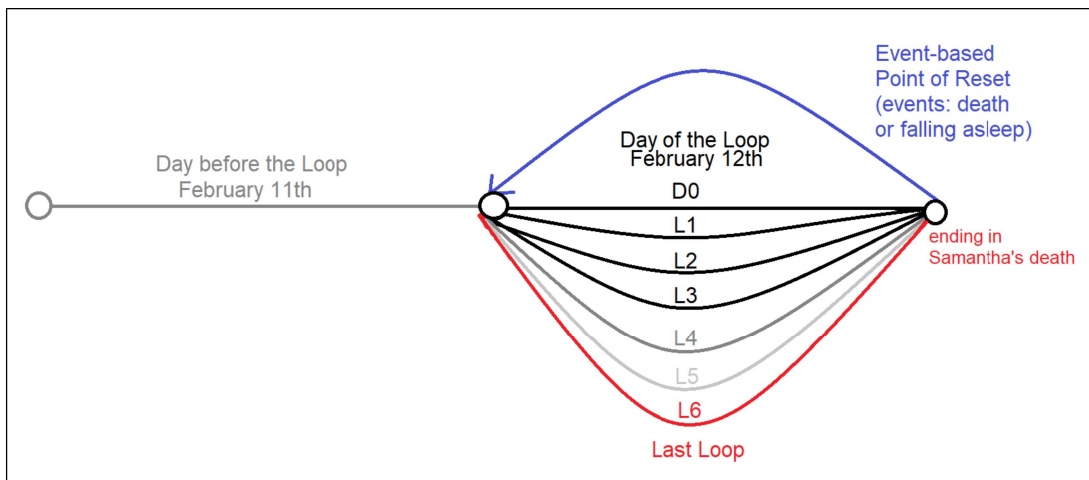

Figure 3: Samantha's event-based time loop in Before I Fall (2010)

During earlier loops, Samantha is unsure if she is on an internal or external quest. She tries to prevent the confrontation between her friends and Juliet as well as the car accident from happening and to make amends with Juliet by apologizing to her and stopping her friends' bullying of her. However, Samantha comes to realize that her own death is unavoidable, and her transformation into a better person solely for her own sake is, therefore, both not needed as well as not enough. She needs to save Juliet's life and is thus on an external quest to achieve that objective, which she ultimately does on her sixth and final loop that ends in her own death.

3.5 Jessica Brody – A Week of Mondays (2016)

High school student Ellison Sparks experiences a Monday during which absolutely everything goes wrong: she forgets her umbrella at home and is drenched for picture day at school; she has an allergic reaction shortly before delivering an important speech; she fails the tryouts for the softball team; and at the end of the day, her rock star boyfriend Tristan breaks up with her on what was supposed to be a romantic date at the fair. Lying in bed at night Ellison actively wishes for a repeat of the day, thinking repeatedly, "Please just let me do it over. Please give me another chance. I swear

I'll get it right" (Brody 2016: 82). Her wish comes true; Ellison goes to sleep on Monday night and loops back to Monday morning, when her alarm clock wakes her up around 7 am. However, because both Ellison and the reader do not have sufficient information about the specifics of the time loop, it can not be distinctly identified as either a time-based or event-based loop. Ellison is curious about the specifics of the looping: "What if I don't go to sleep? Will everything just fade away? Will my vision cloud over? Will it be like fainting?" (Brody 2016: 369). Despite her curiosity, Ellison does not test the limits of her loop because she is emotionally drained after living through each iteration and just wants to go to sleep. Therefore, the only thing that can be concluded is that the looping is triggered either by Ellison going to sleep (which would make it an event-based loop) or sometime between 10:42 pm and 7 am (which would make it a time-based loop), as 10:42 pm is the latest Ellison stays awake while being stuck in the loop. Ellison experiences one "original" Monday and six repetitions of it, resulting in her living through the eponymous *Week of Mondays*.
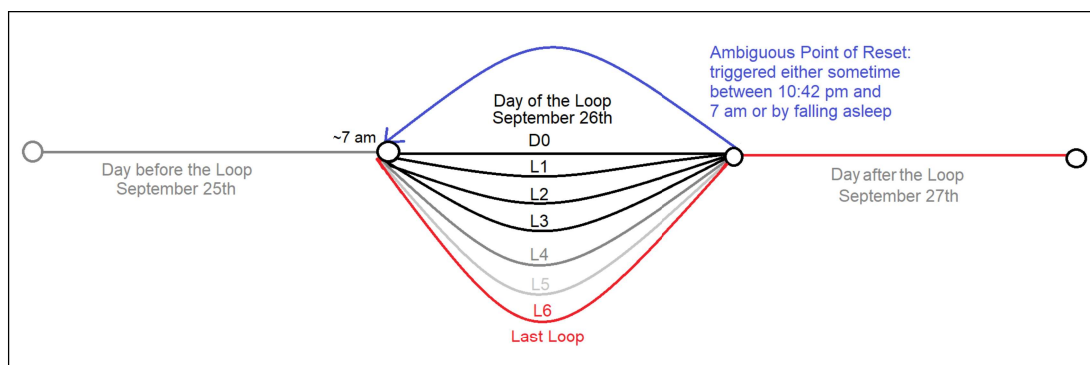

Figure 4: Ellison's ambiguous time loop in A Week of Mondays (2016)

Similar to Samantha in *Before I Fall*, Ellison also spends the majority of her time in the loop making false assumptions about what she is meant to achieve during it. She believes her objective is to stop her boyfriend Tristan from breaking up with her, which would mean Ellison is on an external quest to reach this objective. During the first, second, fourth, and fifth loops Tristan does break up with her; during the third loop, she manages to make them stay together and falsely assumes the loop to be over as a result. In the sixth and final loop, Ellison breaks up with Tristan herself because the time she spent in the previous loops made her realize that she was never able to be authentically herself around him. Instead she realizes that Owen, her best

friend since childhood, has always been at her side and does truly know her as she is, and she kisses him. The loop-breaking event is therefore Ellison realizing her worth as her own person, her being the one breaking up with Tristan and getting together with her best friend Owen. Once again, it cannot be clearly identified what exactly constitutes the loop-breaking event. It can be argued that it is Ellison realizing that the loop is about her and finally acknowledging her own identity, which would mean Ellison was on an internal quest to find herself and realize her own worth. However, it is also possible that breaking up with Tristan or kissing Owen counts as the loop-breaking event, which would make Ellison's quest an external one. In this case, Ellison's internal quest would have been the necessary prerequisite for completing these external quests.

3.6 Marisha Pessl – Neverworld Wake (2018)

The time loop in which Beatrice Hartley and her four friends Whitley, Cannon, Kipling, and Martha get stuck starts when they return from a party on August 30th and narrowly avoid a car accident. The friends are shaken and return to the house where a mysterious figure appears, who calls himself "The Keeper" and tells them that they actually all just died in a car accident. The time loop in *Neverworld Wake* is time-based and begins with a time span of six hundred and seventy-two minutes or eleven point two hours. The time span is not consistent for all five friends: Whitley and Cannon, who sat in the front of the car during the accident, begin with a longer time span of six hundred and seventy-five minutes. The Keeper explains to the friends that "the beginning and end of a wake are based on an infinite number of factors, including violent impact, strength of connection, and random chance." The car accident is named as the reason for this "snag in the space-time fabric" (Pessl 2018: 60). The friends always awaken on August 30th in the car, and the loop – called wake – shortens over time. The looping is therefore based on an ever-decreasing time span. In the final three minutes of every wake the friends need to vote on which one of the friends gets to survive, a scenario they want to avoid at all costs. If the vote does not

happen or is not unanimous with one possible exception, the loop resets again, regardless of what else happened during the loop. The five friends test the limits of the loop thoroughly, as Beatrice tells the reader:

> You can't stay awake. We tried that. No matter how many cups of coffee or how many cans of Red Bull or Monster energy drinks you down, no matter how many caffeine pills or how much ginseng you take, your body gets pulled into the heaviest hollow of sleep you've ever felt in your life. The next thing you know, you're right back where you started. Back at the wake. You can't kill yourself either. Kip tried that. […] The next wake, as usual, he was right beside me in the backseat of the Jaguar […]. (Pessl 2018: 63)

This passage clearly shows how much the friends want to avoid voting on which one of their friends gets to survive. After realizing that staying awake does not work, Kipling tries to commit suicide but just stays dead until the time of the wake runs out and then awakens again in the car. As is often the case in time loops, dying or committing suicide while being stuck in a time loop does not have consequences. In *Neverworld Wake* especially, suicide or dying would be impossible, as all five friends *are* actually dead, with only one of them having the opportunity to break out of the loop and survive the car accident. Beatrice and her friends seemingly have an advantage because they are immediately told in great detail by The Keeper how to break the loop:

> Each of you is, at present, lying kinda sorta dead on the side of a coastal road. […] Time is standing still. It has become trapped inside an eighth of a second like a luna moth inside a mason jar. There is a way out, of course. […] Each of you must vote during the last three minutes of every wake. You must choose the single person among you who will survive. This person will return to life. The remainder of you will move on to true death, a state permanent yet wholly unknown. The decision must be unanimous, save one dissenter. There can be only one who lives. There are no exceptions. (Pessl 2018: 31-32)

However, the loop-breaking event involves Beatrice and her four friends voting on which one of the five friends gets to survive the car accident, and the vote has to be unanimous with one exception allowed. None of the friends perceive this knowledge as an advantage; on the contrary, it leads to them spiraling into excess and violence, living for centuries inside of the loop until the truth about the death of Jim – their

19

friend and Beatrice's boyfriend who died under mysterious circumstances – is revealed.

Neverworld Wake has two exceptional differences to other time loop narratives: Because they are entering the loop in a state of being dead, none of the friends experiences an "original" day of August 30th before the loop. Additionally, the last iteration of the loop does not actually become reality, meaning that the vote inside the loop is therefore the only decision that actually ends up mattering in terms of consequences. Even though Beatrice still remembers her time in the Neverworld, not a single time span she experienced inside the loop ends up becoming reality. After the loop-breaking event, the loop does not lead "out of" the looped time span, continuing on in a linear way, as is usually the case in these narratives, but rather loops back one last time to the moment of the accident from which Beatrice's new reality now begins. While the loop does not have a fixed time span but one that is ever-decreasing, the time inside the wake is not equally important. The vote always has to take place during the last three minutes of a wake, meaning that the loop-breaking event can only take place during this time. While nothing else inside the wake has consequences, during these three minutes the friends have to come together to vote on which one of them gets to survive. Therefore, the friend group can be absolutely sure that if they do not vote at all they will continue to be stuck inside the loop, while other protagonists often have to spend a lot of time finding out or guessing what their objective actually is.

The five friends are on an external quest with a clear objective: agree on which one of them gets to survive the car accident. However, all of them struggle to accept The Keeper's message that they are supposedly already dead, and their strong self-preservation instincts result in frequent disagreements on which one of them gets to survive. As a result, the friends spend a century avoiding their external quest. After the truth about the death of their friend Jim comes to light, they finally take the vote, deciding on Beatrice to survive. Beatrice's last wake is eleven minutes long, after which the loop is reset one last time to the time of the car accident. Beatrice awakens after being in a coma for some time and, just like The Keeper promised, learns that her four friends Whitley, Martha, Kipling, and Cannon did not survive.
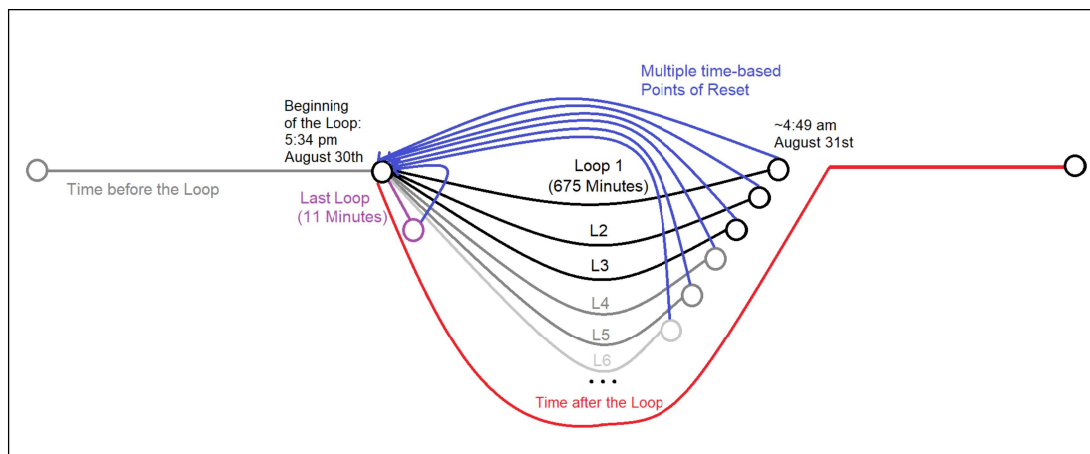
Figure 5: Beatrice's time-based time loop in Neverworld Wake (2018)

4. Narrative Perspective

Before exploring the influence of time loops on the story level and on the protagonist's identity development, it first makes sense to take a look at the narrative perspective and setting of the story to find out how these narrative aspects influence reader immersion and lead to a higher level of identification of the intended young adult reader with the protagonist. To achieve this, I will examine these aspects following Gérard Genette's narrative theory.

All three stories are told from the autodiegetic first-person-perspective of their female teenage protagonist. *Before I Fall* (2010) is narrated in non-chronological order by Samantha. Immediately in the prologue, the reader is told by Samantha that she is actually dead and telling the story from a state in between life and death, recounting events that happened earlier, a narrative anachrony that Genette calls "Analepsis": "They say that just before you die your whole life flashes before your eyes, but that's not how it happened for me" (Oliver 2010: 1). This is the beginning of the first of three levels of narration in which Samantha is addressing the reader of the novel directly with "you," talking about the misconceptions she had about dying. This level of Samantha's narration that directly addresses the reader is always formatted in italics and occurs throughout the story. It also shows that Samantha's narration fulfills an ideological function, meaning the narrator interrupts the story "to in-

troduce instructive comments or general wisdom concerning his narrative" (Guillemette 2019: 250). This clearly marks Samantha as an involved narrator.

On the second level of narration, Samantha recounts her experience on the day before the loop and her time inside the loop in present tense, which leads to the reader experiencing some sense of hope that Samantha might find a way to survive after all. The choice to use the present tense despite the immediate revelation that everything on this second level of narration already happened is an interesting one but ultimately one that can make the reader feel a more immediate connection to this past version of Samantha and her experiences that, for both the reader and this past Samantha, are occurring for the first time.

Additionally, this second level reveals that Samantha narrates with an internal focalization, meaning that she does not know the inner thoughts of other characters, which makes the narrative more immersive for the reader who is in the same position and, therefore, more easily able to identify with Samantha and her story. The third level of narration is Samantha giving the reader an insight into her past before the loop, giving background information on, e.g., how her friendship with Lindsay started, the incident that led to Lindsay's bullying of Juliet and Samantha's own past with Kent, offering the reader some additional insights into how she came to be in the position she is in now, trying to save the girl her friend group bullied for years from committing suicide.

Ellison's narration in *A Week of Mondays* takes place on two different levels. In contrast to *Before I Fall*, the ending of the story does not get spoiled for the reader, but rather the reader experiences most of it through Ellison's simultaneous narration alongside her for the first time in a present tense perspective. Before the beginning of each loop and at the end of each chapter, Ellison takes the reader back to an analeptic second narrative level titled "The Way We Were." In these six installments Ellison tells the story of how she and Tristan met and became a couple, which gives the reader a better understanding of how they could end up in a relationship in the first place. On both levels of her narration, Ellison narrates with an internal focalization and is a detached narrator who only assumes a narrative function without being involved.

In contrast to the previously mentioned narrations, Beatrice's first-person narration in *Neverworld Wake* (2018) takes place in the present tense and is also split into three different parts that are not connected to the number of loops she experiences. This choice is most likely owed to the fact that Beatrice lives through an incredibly high number of loops, and neither herself nor the reader gets to know the actual number of iterations. The first part of the story begins when Beatrice decides to meet up with her four friends Whitley, Cannon, Martha, and Kipling after receiving a text from Whitley in which she complains that they had not seen each other for over a year.

After being stuck in the loop for a while and drifting apart while every one of the friends tries to deal with the knowledge of being dead in their own way, the second part of the story begins when the friends decide to use the unique time and space properties offered by the wake to find out if their friend and Beatrice's boyfriend Jim's death really was a suicide. The third part of the story begins when Beatrice manages to travel back in time and actually meet Jim and relive the time she was invited by him to his great-uncle's funeral. As the story unfolds, Beatrice is exposed as an unreliable narrator who chose to omit the knowledge she had about the circumstances of her ex-boyfriend's death. Fittingly enough, all five friends each had some part of responsibility in Jim's death that they kept secret from the others. Only through traveling back and re-living the evening of his death can the friends fit their puzzle pieces of knowledge together and manage to finally know the whole story.

It is not surprising that all three time loop narratives are told from a first-person perspective, seeing as the consequences of the time loop experienced by the protagonist are mainly internal and therefore invisible to an outsider. The reader gets a first-hand impression of the protagonist's distress, which facilitates immersion into the story and the reader's identification with the protagonist. Readers can more easily identify with the protagonist and are encouraged to think about how they would behave if they were to find themselves in the same situation. Following these observations, the next chapter will examine the influence time loop narratives have on the topic of identity.

5. Identity

*"Find out who you are
and do it on purpose."*
Dolly Parton

The topic of building and changing identity is especially prevalent in young adult fiction. Even though time loop narratives of other genres also address identity, as well as personal change and growth, this transitional period of reaching the objective of the time loop is especially intense during young adulthood, with the time loop acting as a catalyst that speeds up this process immeasurably. In comparison to older adults, young adults stuck in a time loop have the advantage of their identity not yet being fully realized. This means that the accelerated changes in regard to personality and identity required by the time loop are often actualized more effortlessly by a young adult than would be the case for someone who might have been set in their ways for decades.

On adults, time loops have a different effect: adults often have an established identity, know who they are, and have completed their coming-of-age process. However, adult protagonists in time loop narratives often treat their fellow human beings badly, have a lot of regrets, or become someone they themselves are unhappy with. Adults usually have more regrets than young adults because they simply lived longer and therefore had more opportunities to make choices they could regret. Additionally, adults are often used to the persona they have taken (whether they actually like it or not) and might be more averse to the change that a time loop forces them into. Schwartz et al. define identity as follows:

> Viewed through the lens of an individual person, identity consists of the confluence of the person's self-chosen or ascribed commitments, personal characteristics, and beliefs about herself; roles and positions in relation to significant others; and her membership in social groups and categories (including both her status within the group and the group's status within the larger context); as well as her identification with treasured material possessions and her sense of where she belongs in geographical space. (Schwartz 2012: 4)

At this stage in their life, the identity of the young adult is still somewhat fluid, and they often experience phases in which they try out different personas and characters, with all developmental approaches agreeing that "forming identity is the foremost challenge during adolescence" (Waller 2009: 57). This process of forming identity is commonly known as "growing up," with the young adult having to decide which parts of their identity they want or have to keep and which parts of their identity they have to grow out of. During this process, the young adult's decisions are usually heavily influenced by explicit and implicit messages from society, family, and peer groups about who they are supposed to be. While undergoing this transition, young adults can be seen as "inhabitants of liminal space as they negotiate the terrain between childhood and adulthood, trying out identities to see what does and doesn't fit" (Doughty 2011: 155).

During her research with young adults, Gisela Konopka managed to identify the following five key concepts of adolescence: an "experience of physical sexual maturity," an "experience of withdrawal of and from adult benevolent protection," a "consciousness of self in interaction," a "re-evaluation of values," and an "experimentation" (1973: 298-300). Furthermore, her research pointed to six qualities of adolescence: "audacity and insecurity," a "deep sense of loneliness," a "high degree of psychological vulnerability," "mood swings," a "strong peer group need," and a "need to be argumentative and emotional" (300-301).

This phase of young adulthood, marking the transition from childhood to adulthood, is clearly a time for building, re-evaluating and exploring of identity. All the earlier themes of young adult literature that are also present in the lives of actual young adults directly influence the question of identity, something that Schwartz defines as most fundamentally involving people's explicit or implicit responses to the question: "Who are you?" He goes on to explain that this definition may sound simple but is in fact masking "a considerable amount of complexity." The "you" in "who are you?" can be understood as singular or plural, depending on if the self-definition refers to someone as an individual or to someone as a part of a larger group (Schwartz 2012: 2). The young adult is going through the process of finding out who

they are in relation to other people. The key concepts by Konopka play an important role during this process: "experience of physical sexual maturity" means the young adult experiments with their identity as a sexual being, finding out what they enjoy sexually and if and with whom they want to experience sexuality.

The "experience of withdrawal of and from adult benevolent protection" means the young adult has to stand up for themselves and solve problems on their own without adult involvement, finding their identity as a human being capable of establishing and defending themselves. The "consciousness of self in interaction" means that young adults oftentimes become hyper-aware of how they look, sound, and generally present to other people. They might experiment with language, clothing, hairstyles, and make-up, learn how to differentiate their speech, dress, and behavior according to the people they interact with and may need to create different identities to suit different interaction styles. The "re-evaluation of values" means the young adult needs to critically examine the values represented by society, family, or school and decide if those values fit their own set of values. Some might be seen as useful and will be represented by themselves, while others might be actively rejected.

"Experimentation," Konopka's last key concept of adolescence, both summarizes the earlier concepts as well as emphasizes the fact that finding identity in adolescence is an ongoing process (Konopka 1973: 298-300). The young adult might try out different roles and identities, leaving some behind and coming back to others before possibly sticking to one for a longer time. However, the process of identity formation is never fully finished, and identity issues may be revisited later in adulthood as well, often with developmental and social-relational events such as divorce, illness, or parenthood acting as a trigger. "Nevertheless, most developmental psychological approaches continue to view identity as relatively stable once it has been formed" (Schwartz 2012: 10).

In combination with the narrative mechanic of a time loop, finding and forming identity undergoes a compelling twist: Schwartz et al. observed that even though all possible identities might be future-oriented, how time is marked greatly influences how people think about their possible identities and the likelihood that this

26

possible identity will cue identity-based motivational striving. As an example, they name high school students who often mark the time of graduation as the time "when the future begins." As a result, they experience the present as separate from the future and view their future as something distant and vague:

> When the future begins later, there is not much that can be done now – except wait for the future to arrive. Conversely, the present can be seen as connecting fluidly to the future, and as such, as a time for setting the groundwork for what will become possible in the future. When the future begins now, current action is immediately necessary. (Schwartz et al. (eds.) 2012: 129)

The young adults stuck in the time loop are in the unique position of not getting a future, so to speak, but at the same time being stuck in the loop and trying to break out of it makes current action immediately necessary. Each reset of the time loop takes away the possibility of a future and presents the protagonist with a repetition of the same day that for them feels like present and past simultaneously. While trying to escape the loop, the protagonist struggles to make the most out of their present situation, and the future becomes something to be earned, a reward for fulfilling a certain objective. The time loop becomes a lesson for protagonist and reader alike, reminding them that even in our ordinary, daily lives we are never guaranteed a future, as no one can predict when we will die, no matter how young or healthy we may be. Additionally, the time loop mechanic emphasizes the importance of living in the moment and being mindful of how daily actions influence our lives and the ones of those around us. The time loop therefore acts as a catalyst for identity change because this process of becoming a different, more responsible, morally conscious, kind and aware person, that in most people would take years, if it happens at all, needs to be accelerated if the protagonist wants to achieve the loop-breaking event and stop reliving the same time span over and over again.

Not only is the time loop responsible for accelerated identity chance, Waller also points out the solitary nature of identity achievement in teenage fantastic realism during which the protagonist is usually "isolated from any sense of wider community by their personal experience of the fantastic, a pattern that is in direct contrast to the communal atmosphere of magic realism or pure fantasy" (Waller 2009: 55). This iso-

lation, that exists as a result of the realistic setting and is in stark contrast to the experience a young adult protagonist would have in a true fantasy or science fiction setting, creates an even more intense focus on the self, allowing the protagonist only incredibly restricted possibilities to receive help or advice from the people around them, whose memory is reset with every loop. Referring back to Konopka, the young adult is without benevolent adult protection, is almost forced to spend the time in the loop re-evaluating their values, and often uses the risk-free space of the time loop to explore parts of their identity like self-presentation including clothing and behavior. In the following part of this thesis we will examine which changes of identity the three protagonists Samantha Kingston, Ellison Sparks, and Beatrice Hartley undergo and which influence their respective time loop has on this development.

5.1 Samantha Kingston

"Death is only the end
if you assume
the story is about you."
Welcome to Night Vale

Samantha Kingston's identity before the loop is hugely dependent on and influenced by her group of friends consisting of Lindsay, Ally, and Elody. Through her friendship with them, Samantha has achieved a popularity among her high school peers that affords her many privileges. She is aware of the fact that popularity is an arbitrary status marker that is not easy to define but makes clear that, after a childhood of being bullied, she does not feel ashamed to finally be popular:

> Popularity's a weird thing. You can't really define it, and it's not cool to talk about it, but you know it when you see it. […] Lindsay once had a burping contest […] in the cafeteria and everyone applauded her. Sometimes Elody wears fuzzy yellow slippers to school. I once laughed so hard in social studies I spit up vanilla latte […] The point is, we can do things like that. You know why? Because we're popular. And we're popular because we can get away with everything. So it's circular. I guess what I'm saying is there's no point in analyzing it. If you draw a circle, there will al-

28

ways be an inside and an outside, and unless you're a total nut job, it's pretty easy to see which is which. It's just what happens. I'm not going to lie, though. It's nice that everything's easy for us. It's a good feeling knowing you can basically do whatever you want and there won't be any consequences. […] If high school were a game of poker, Lindsay, Ally, Elody, and I would be holding 80 percent of the cards. And believe me: I know what it's like to be on the other side. I was there for the first half of my life. The bottom of the bottom, lowest of the low. I know what it's like to have to squabble and pick and fight over the leftovers. So now I have first pick of every thing. So what. That's the way it is. Nobody ever said life was fair. (Oliver 2010: 12-13)

In her striving for popularity, Samantha's relationship to Kent has suffered. Being best friends in childhood, Samantha now almost feels ashamed to be seen with him, even going as far as calling him a freak:

> I've never understood Kent. Or at least I haven't understood him in years. We were super close when we were little—technically I suppose he was my best friend as well as my first kiss—but as soon as he hit middle school, he started getting weirder and weirder. Since freshman year he's always worn a blazer to school, even though most of the ones he owns are ripped at the seams or have holes in the elbows. He wears the same scuffed-up black-and-white checkered sneakers every day and his hair is so long it's like a curtain that swings down over his eyes every five seconds. But the real deal breaker is this: he actually wears a bowler hat. To school. The worst thing is that he could be cute. He has the face and the body for it. He has a tiny heart-shaped mole under his left eye, no joke. But he has to screw it up by being such a freak. (Oliver 2010: 22)

Her changed behavior towards Kent clearly shows the change in value she has undergone during recent years. While Kent has established an identity with which he feels comfortable and that is mostly visible in the unique way he dresses, Samantha cannot comprehend how someone could make choices that would lower their popularity. This once again reinforces that Samantha is completely caught up in the popularity dynamics of high school, letting those dynamics rule every aspect of her life.

Additionally, Samantha struggles heavily with the "experience of withdrawal of and from adult benevolent protection," which Konopka calls one of the five key concepts of adulthood. Her upholding of the values her clique instilled in her (coolness, aloofness, arrogance) bleeds into her family life, and she tries hard to distance herself from her parents and sister, spending as little time with them as possible:

> For years that's been the buzzword of the house: Sam just wants to be left alone. Want some dinner? *I'll bring it up to my room.* Where you headed? *Just want to be alone.* Can I come in? *Just leave me alone. Stay out of my room. Don't talk to me when I'm on the phone. Don't talk to me when I'm listening to music. Alone, alone, alone.* Things change after you die, though – I guess because dying is about the loneliest thing you can do. (Oliver 2010: 200)

Freshman year, after a big fight with her mother, Samantha drew a line in red nail polish just inside her door and told her mother that if she ever crossed the line, she would never speak to her again. The line acts as a physical representation for Samantha's need to be alone, and to her surprise, her mother respects her wishes. Samantha says that while she meant it at the time, she "expected her to forget after a while" (Oliver 2010: 97) and expresses disappointment at the fact that her mother does not enter her room anymore. This shows Samantha's internal struggle: her need for independence as a young adult is at war with her need for having her mother close. Later, when Samantha tells her mother about breaking up with Rob, "the craziest thing in the world happens" (Oliver 2010: 199) and her mother crosses the line, literally and figuratively, to console her and kiss her forehead, which leaves Samantha speechless. It becomes clear that Samantha regrets the development she has gone through in her young adulthood and that she pushed her parents away even though she still needed them at her side. One day, when her mother tells her to put on some more clothes so she does not get sick, Samantha snaps:

> "You care now?" She jerked back at the sound of my voice like I'd reached out and slapped her. "You want to help now? You want to protect me now?" What I really wanted to say was, Where were you four days ago? Where were you when my car was spinning off the edge of a road in the middle of the night? Why weren't you thinking of me? Why weren't you there? I hate both of my parents right now: for sitting quietly in our house, while out in the darkness my heart was beating away all of the seconds of my life, ticking them off one by one until my time was up; for letting the thread between us stretch so far and so thin that the moment it was severed for good they didn't even feel it. At the same time I know that it's not really their fault, at least not completely. I did my part too. I did it on a hundred different days and in a thousand different ways, and I know it. But this makes the anger worse, not better. Your parents are supposed to keep you safe. (Oliver 2010: 136)

She unleashes her anger about being dead and reliving her dying day over and over again and expresses regret about pushing her parents away from her in the first place. Samantha comes to understand that not even her parents can protect her from death. This knowledge, combined with the realization that she will lose her family and that they in turn will lose her, turns her desperate.

Generally, sooner or later, life inside the loop and the inability to escape always turns the protagonist's desperation into apathy. With no linear progression of time, consequences become meaningless and limits are being tested. In one iteration of the loop, Samantha dresses provocatively and seduces her math teacher Mr. Daimler. She acts like this not because she is secretly in love with him but as a way to exercise control in a situation where she feels absolutely powerless. This phase clearly shows what effect the concept of "there is no tomorrow" can have on a person and conveys a sense of the limitless and hedonistic life one would probably live if a loop allowed the people around us to forget how we behaved. Samantha herself describes this reckless behavior as a loss of identity:

> Here's one of the things I learned that morning: if you cross a line and nothing happens, the line loses meaning. It's like that old riddle about a tree falling in a forest, and whether it makes a sound if there's no one around to hear it. You keep drawing a line farther and farther away, crossing it every time. That's how people end up stepping off the edge of the earth. You'd be surprised at how easy it is to bust out of orbit, to spin out to a place where no one can touch you. To lose yourself—to get lost. (Oliver 2010: 142)

Additionally, this phase is also an exploration of her sexuality, a topic she is insecure about as the original plan for the day of the loop was for her and her boyfriend Rob to have sex for the first time. One of the reasons Samantha cites for this decision is that she does not want Lindsay and Elody to keep making fun of her anymore for being a virgin, clearly showing that even in this intimate decision regarding her sexuality, Samantha is heavily influenced by the peer pressure her friends put on her. She is extremely unsure about Rob and confesses that she often has to mentally recount the reasons why she likes him in the first place. Throughout the loop, Samantha realizes

that she is not in love with Rob but with the popularity she gained from their relationship and ultimately breaks up with him.

Both her relationship with Lindsay as well as her relationship with Rob are a sign of Samantha's desperate need for validation and popularity. Even though Lindsay was the one who started a derogatory chant mocking Samantha's red and blotchy skin, which resulted in years of her childhood being marred by the experience of being bullied, Samantha still jumped at the chance to become friends with Lindsay, which she saw as her ticket to become part of the high society of their high school. Similarly, Rob was Samantha's crush since sixth grade but back then publicly rejected her as "not cool enough for him" because of her social status as an outcast. Being in a relationship with him despite his past treatment of her shows Samantha's lack of self-respect, as she has chosen to be with someone who previously looked down on her. Additionally, the relationship seems as if Samantha is trying to prove to herself that there are no limits to the things that her newly gained popularity allows her to achieve.

The decision to be friends with her former bully Lindsay is not one born from forgiveness but rather from taking the easy way out. Samantha acts as a mirror image of Juliet: while Samantha is the victim turned best friend of Lindsay, Juliet completed the opposite transition from Lindsay's best friend to the victim of her abuse. The reason for Lindsay's bullying is also grounded in her fear of becoming a social outcast. When her parents were going through a nasty divorce, young Lindsay wet the bed during a camping trip and publicly blamed Juliet for it. Instead of moving on from this single incident, Lindsay made up a cruel nickname for her supposed best friend, who in turn took the blame to protect Lindsay out of sympathy for her.

Ultimately, every young adult in the book is caught up in the high school dynamics of peer pressure, popularity, and social shaming, and Juliet's life acts as an extreme monument to the devastating effects years of social rejection and bullying can have on a person. During her quest to save Juliet, Samantha undergoes a painful metamorphosis: she starts out as a teenager without a care in the world and suddenly is forced to realize how much suffering her carelessness has caused. She wistfully

thinks back to life before she became a teenager and how her identity changed when she became a young adult and was exposed to the peer pressure and popularity dynamics in high school:

> It's weird how much people change. For example, when I was a kid I loved all of these things [...] and over time all of them just fell away, one after another, replaced by friends and IMing and cell phones and boys and clothes. It's kind of sad, if you think about it. Like there's no continuity in people at all. Like something ruptures when you hit twelve, or thirteen, or whatever the age is when you're no longer a kid but a 'young adult,' and after that you're a totally different person. Maybe even a less happy person. Maybe even a worse one. (Oliver 2010: 200-201)

Through Juliet's repeated confrontation with her at the party, Samantha is finally thinking about the kind of person she has become, the repetition of the loop making it impossible for Samantha to run away from her past identity. Juliet reminds her that Samantha and her friends stole her clothes from the locker room, called her *Psycho* whenever she entered a room, took pictures of her while she was showering and posted them all over school. While Samantha apologizes and does not remember ever instigating any of those incidents, the cruel actions of her and her friends have added up over the years and done almost irreversible damage to Juliet. Samantha realizes that undoing the regular abuse that took place over years is almost possible to achieve in just one day. Ultimately, the extreme but necessary loop-breaking event constitutes Samantha pushing Juliet out of the way of an oncoming truck, preventing Juliet's suicide and sacrificing herself in the process. Samantha frequently disrupts the narrative with her current thoughts and comments about her regretful past behavior, oftentimes directly addressing the young adult reader:

> Be honest: are you surprised that I didn't realize sooner? Are you surprised that it took me so long to even think the word – death? Dying? Dead? Do you think I was being stupid? Naive? Try not to judge. Remember that we're the same, you and me. I thought I would live forever, too. (Oliver 2010: 96)

This passage clearly prompts the reader to identify with Samantha's situation and position and to think about their own mortality. The reader is asked to realize that just because they might be young, that does not automatically mean that they will grow old or have the opportunity to make up for regrettable behavior in the future. Her sto-

ry acts as a memento mori, a reminder that death is inevitable and "[t]hat nothing here is promised, not one day" (Miranda 2016). The young adult reader is asked to appreciate each day of their life, treat others with kindness and ultimately, when they have to leave this world, to leave it in a better state than they found it, or if that goal seems unattainable, to at least not have done any additional harm to it. Ultimately, Samantha's story is not about her but about what she leaves behind, her legacy, the redemption she manages to achieve by dying as a heroine and sacrificing herself to enable the future of a girl whose past was ruined by Samantha and her friends.

5.2 Ellison Sparks

"Most people are other people.
Their thoughts are someone else's opinions,
their lives a mimicry,
their passions a quotation."
Oscar Wilde

Sixteen-year-old Ellison Sparks always dreamed about spending a romantic evening at the fair with her rock star boyfriend Tristan. But instead of riding the Ferris wheel and eating cotton candy, Tristan breaks up with her, citing confusion and the feeling "that something is broken" as his reason. Ellison is devastated and sees the ensuing loop as a sign that she is supposed to stop Tristan from breaking up with her.

Tristan is Ellison's first boyfriend and she is very aware of her inexperience regarding romantic relationships. During their first meeting, Tristan perceives her shyness as a laid-back attitude and tells Ellison that she does not seem like a drama queen. Ellison consciously decides in this moment to take on the fake persona of Tristan's first impression of her:

> The truth was I didn't know who I was. Particularly not when it came to relationships. Was I the dramatic type? The pouting type? The jealous type? He didn't seem to think so. Was it possible he'd gleaned more about me in the ten minutes we'd been talking than I'd learned in my entire life? I was so ready to be the person he thought I was. The person I thought he needed me to be at that moment. (Brody 2016: 160)

This train of thought reveals several things about Ellison's identity: she has a desperate need for Tristan's (and probably other's) approval; she is aware of her inexperience in regard to relationships; and she does not seem to have an established identity yet. Her thinking that someone she just met would be able to know more about her than she does herself clearly shows that Ellison does not know anything about herself. Her inexperience combined with her need to be liked by Tristan leads to her making the decision to fill the gaps in her identity with Tristan's assumptions about her. Her plan works, and her relationship with Tristan suddenly puts her in the spotlight at school and at the center of unwanted attention. This development makes Ellison incredibly uncomfortable, and she adjusts her behavior to avoid being seen and judged by other people – even going as far as taking detours to class and not using the restroom at school anymore (Brody 2016: 374).

Ellison's low self-confidence also becomes apparent when talking with Tristan about other girls. She is incredibly jealous of the female fans of Tristan's band and overcompensates her insecurities by showing narcissistic traits by thinking about herself as different from and better than other girls, specifically saying she does not "want to be like all the other girls he's dated" (Brody 2016: 16). Ellison does not actually know any of Tristan's ex-girlfriends and simply takes Tristan's description of them as "dramatic" at face value. In her quest for Tristan's approval, Ellison makes up the equation that all of Tristan's ex-girlfriends being dramatic means that if she acts in a way that Tristan could perceive as dramatic, she will also become one of his exes.

Her tactics to stop Tristan from breaking up with her become as extreme as following "girl commandments" like "thou shall always be a creature of mystery" or "thou shall always appear busy and important." Ellison's lack of an established identity means she willingly takes on any outside guidance that tells her how she should behave. The mission becomes a game for her, and she often uses game terminology like "playing by the rules," "winning," and "earning a reward" to refer to her quest. Ellison finally succeeds during the third loop but becomes desperate when the loop still resets and, during the next iteration, Tristan breaks up with her once again. Elli-

son still sees her identity as the culprit and wreaks havoc on her room as a way to vent her frustrations:

> I yank posters from the wall. I destroy everything. Until there's nothing left of my old, safe world. This is the new Ellison Sparks. She is reckless. She is determined. [...] Past Ellie would be mortified right now. For her, this would be the equivalent of a walk of shame. But not me. Not anymore. That old Ellie is gone. [...] She had her chance and she failed. She lost the boy. She blew it. It's time to try something completely different. It's time to become someone completely new. (Brody 2016: 229 - 230)

Ellison refers to the person she was a few moments ago as a past identity and simultaneously feels the need to immediately create a new possible identity, one that helps her achieve her goal. In identity research, "possible identities are the positive and negative identities one might hold in the future" (Schwartz 2012: 117). Not only is Ellison convinced that she needs to stay together with Tristan, she also assumes that this goal is not congruent with her current identity. This assumption most likely stems from the fact that Ellison *knows* that the identity she portrays in her relationship with Tristan is only a role she is playing. Therefore, her conclusion is that she needs to adapt and improve this role until it exactly fits Tristan's requirements.

Ellison is close to completely losing any semblance of a real identity she still has left when her best friend Owen brings up the possibility that the loop might not actually be about getting Tristan back but about getting *herself* back. Only then does Ellison realize her true objective. Even though she had at this point already lived through her sixth Monday in a row, Ellison never even entertained the possibility that the loop could be about herself and not about Tristan. This reinforces that Ellison voluntarily gave up her own interests, character, and ultimately identity to cater to the wishes of her boyfriend without regard for her own personhood, wishes, and needs.

Suddenly, with her own being in the focus of her investigations, she comes to realize that her insecurity led to her attaching herself to Tristan because the attention she received from him and the popularity that came with their relationship made her feel as if she was something special. She now comes to understand that she inherently has worth both as a person and as a girlfriend, regardless if Tristan or someone else recognizes her worth or not. She also realizes that her best friend Owen always

saw her exactly for who she was and that she never had to act like someone else when she was spending time with him.

Ellison operated from the first day of her relationship with Tristan on the false assumption that Tristan could never like her for who she truly is. Intimidated by his popularity, she was the one who made the decision to become someone else in the hopes of pleasing him in her role as his girlfriend. Tristan was not aware that Ellison took his lamentations about his ex-girlfriends and molded herself into someone who appeared to be the opposite of them. When Ellison finally shows Tristan her true self, it turns out that he likes her after all. However, Ellison still decides to break up with him, as she finally realizes that being with Tristan means betraying her identity.

5.3 Beatrice Hartley

"I knew what was to come,
and somehow when it came,
it was a relief,
an ending of expectation,
and so a lesser event."
Claire North – The First Fifteen Lives of Harry August

Before the events of the Neverworld, Beatrice can be described as talented but over-looked. She has the unique hobby of writing music soundtracks to films she makes up in her head but never shares her writing with anyone. Her boyfriend Jim, a genius writer himself, is described by her as a person bigger than life itself:

> He was beautiful in the unlikely way of some eighteenth-century hero galloping across moors on horseback: six foot three, honey-brown stare, uncombed black hair, cockeyed smile. But there was something else too. He was alive. If life force is a river's current, Jim's was so strong it could take off your fingers. He charged through an ordinary Monday as if he had been tasked with imparting a crucial secret about existence before Tuesday. […] The worst thing about Jim was that his intensity attracted everyone. He was the light on a porch at night. Men and women young and old, swirled around him, as if mistaking the attention of Jim Mason for a miracle dip in Lourdes. I couldn't fault them. He made them feel important and less alone. (Pessl 2018: 110)

Beatrice tries to find her place in her relationship with Jim, describing the feeling of being the subject of his attention as "having a bomb go off in my face: unexpected, shocking, accompanied by a fallout of popular girls suddenly approaching me with long, swingy mermaid hair and doubtful glances" (Pessl 2018: 216). Looking back on their relationship, Beatrice is certain that she loved Jim but regrets that their "relationship could feel like a blackout sometimes. I'd get swept up in him, then days, weeks later suddenly look around, unnerved, wondering where I was, what time it was" (Pessl 2018: 128). Beatrice gets caught in the pull of Jim, revolving around him and neglecting to pursue her own dreams and goals. When Jim struggles to finish writing his musical in time, Beatrice offers him her own music to pass of as his writing. During the last wake, Martha confronts her about her unconditional support of Jim:

> Jim thought nothing of passing off your words as his own. Did he say he was just *borrowing* them? That he'd give you credit *later*? He swallowed everything around him, leaving nothing behind. [...] It's so funny. For such an energetic person, the space around him was always so cold. And anyway, his grand plans for himself always exceeded his actual talent. (Pessl 2018: 297)

Martha makes the important point that Jim's genius and popularity made him uncaring and cold towards everyone else. On the day of Jim's death, Beatrice wants to surprise him by meeting with him in a lookout. When Jim drunkenly climbs up the old ladder, part of it breaks away, leaving Jim reaching for Beatrice's hand. She hesitates for four seconds and Jim falls. Beatrice says she wished that her lack of a reaction was due to panic, "but it wasn't. It was something else too. A little cave inside my heart. Somehow I knew if I pulled him up I'd never be free of him. […] Maybe it was the question that if he could so easily take my words, would he take everything else?" (Pessl 2018: 306). Her instinctive reaction shows her subconscious realization that her relationship with Jim made her feel inferior and led to her losing herself completely in him, forgetting about her own identity, wishes, and needs.

Beatrice is the only one of the three protagonists who gives the reader an insight into her life after the loop. After waking up from her coma, she describes her life after the wake:

> So began life outside of the Neverworld. It was different from what I remembered. I was different. And it wasn't just the scar of a reverse question mark wrapping around my skull above my right ear. My hair hid the scar, but it was there if you looked for it, my tattoo, my memento. To outsiders I seemed confident, if a little solemn. I was less prone to biting my lip and tucking my hair behind my ears. I no longer worried whether people liked me, or whether I was pretty or had made a mistake. I wasn't afraid to eat in a crowded cafeteria at a table alone or talk to a cute boy I didn't know, or to sing karaoke, audition, give a speech. All the things people spend so much time worrying about in this world – the Neverworld had unchained me from all that. I was no longer in a hurry to fill silence. I could just let it sit forever like a bowl of fruit. (Pessl 2018: 317)

Beatrice's state of mind after her experience in the loop resembles the psychological phenomenon of *Posttraumatic Growth*, a phrase developed by Tedeschi and Calhoun in 1995 "to refer to the positive psychological changes that a person experiences as a result of enduring stress and trauma" (Werdel 2012: 12). Beatrice reports that she lost her shyness and has become more brave, the everyday anxieties of the ordinary young adulthood paling in comparison to her experiences in the Neverworld. Beatrice not only lived through the death of her boyfriend Jim in which she had some – even if not intentional – involvement and the traumatic events of the Neverworld itself, she then woke up from a coma having lost her four friends in the car accident. Even though Beatrice had – in comparison to Samantha and Ellison – the advantage of not having to experience the loop by herself, she is the only one of her friends to survive and carry the memory of everything that happened in the Neverworld. After waking up from her coma and realizing that her doctor looks like The Keeper in the Neverworld, Beatrice is not really sure if the events she experienced in the loop actually happened. However, she takes the fact that her sense of time is still warped as confirmation that they did:

> The only real evidence of the Neverworld's existence was time. It no longer ran in a straight line for me. Instead, now and then, it looped and lost its balance. An hour would pass in the blink of an eye. I'd sit down for a history lecture and my mind would wander so completely, the bell would ring and I'd realize in shock that everyone was packing up to leave, an entire class's worth of notes scribbled across the dry-erase board, which seconds earlier had been bare. (Pessl 2018: 318)

Not only has Beatrice come out of her traumatic experience with a more resilient character, she also actively made changes in her life that reflect her new personality

and values: she transfers colleges to study music theory and art history, starts working part-time at a video game company, and becomes a volunteer for a nonprofit where she reads bedtime stories to foster children. She even finally shares her art that she previously kept hidden by publishing a CD with one of her soundtracks for a non-existent film, keeping her promise to Martha to "never, ever give away [her] words again" (Pessl 2018: 298). Beatrice overcame her trauma in a way that she never managed after the death of her boyfriend Jim, most likely because earlier she was lacking the closure of knowing how he actually died. Beatrice actively reflects on her experience in the Neverworld, citing it as a reason for her newfound appreciation of life:

> I had lived a century inside a second. I had died thousands of times, learned about and loved four people in a way few ever had the chance. I had called a place home where details such as life and death didn't matter, where what did matter were the trembling moments of connection in between. And afterward, you felt nothing but awe for every second of your little life. (Pessl 2018: 316)

Not only did Beatrice experience a longer time span than is actually possible for someone her age, she actually lived centuries inside the wake, meaning that according to the time spent in the loop her memory more likely resembles that of an immortal being than that of, for example, an 80-year-old. Even though Beatrice says that her experience in the Neverworld made her appreciate life more, it can be assumed that the wisdom she gained from living through it will make her have a hard time relating to other people and their everyday problems and worries in the future – regardless of whether these people are the same age as her or not.

6. Conclusion

While time loop narratives have been around for a long time, their foray into young adult fiction has been fairly recent. In this thesis I showed that the young adult genre with its stories about finding and building identity is a perfect fit for time loop narratives, which often act as a catalyst that forces the protagonist into a phase of accelerated personal growth and change. Furthermore, the findings show that time loops in young adult fiction often have similarities in regard to narrative perspective and often portray a female teenage protagonist, which leads to a high amount of possible opportunities for the intended teenaged reader to identify with the protagonist of the story and to take the lessons they learned with them. Nevertheless, the lessons about responsibility, kindness, and living life in an intentional way that suits your identity are universal and act as a helpful reminder for readers of any age group.

Ultimately, time loop narratives are not about time but rather about personal change. The time spent inside the loop offers the protagonist a space for risk-free exploration, personal growth and, most importantly, the time to think about the important questions of life and identity that often get lost in the daily routine: Who am I? Who do I want to be? And what changes need to happen to bridge the gap between my current and future self? Young adults stuck in a time loop learn a lesson about responsibility and their own agency. They see again and again how much or little influence they have on their daily lives and also that the actions and influences of their family, friends, or peers are not an excuse for own bad behavior.

Through the looping of a certain time span, the YA protagonist starts to realize that some things (being a kind person, following their own interests, saving a life) matter more than others (being the girlfriend of a popular guy, shaping your identity according to what others think about you). While this process is one that most people experience slowly over their teenage years, the loop acts as a catalyst that speeds up this whole process and clearly shows the protagonist that even small actions – good or bad – have consequences. Time loops narratives in the young adult genre are therefore not only compelling and suspenseful narratives, they also offer moral edu-

cation and teach young readers the value of friendship and family, not to lose themselves in relationships and to prefer kindness over popularity. For the protagonist's environment, this transformation that is happening inside of the loop is oftentimes seen as drastic and sudden because for them it happened in an incredibly short amount of time – sometimes over a single day.

All three time loop narratives examined in this thesis are essentially about the protagonist losing themselves and their identity and having to find their way back to themselves. Samantha loses herself in her friendship with and loyalty to Lindsay, Ally, and Elody and in keeping the new-found popularity that came along with this friendship after being bullied as a child. Ellison loses herself in her relationship to Tristan, being dazzled by his fame and musical talent, trying to cater to his every whim just not to lose the attention of the most popular boy in school, while thinking that both of them being interested in music is enough of a foundation for a relationship. Beatrice also loses herself in a romantic relationship. Her boyfriend Jim straddles the genius/insanity border and makes everyone around him feel small in comparison, having no problem using Beatrice's talent with words for his own gain and without giving her credit. Because of Beatrice's insecurity, she did not see this act as something negative and is just happy to help her boyfriend, while she becomes a simple sidekick instead of following her own dreams and being recognized for her own talents.

As my research had a strong focus on narratives set in a realistic setting in which the time loop is the only fantastical element, further research could explore if these findings also apply to time loop narratives in the young adult genre with, e.g., a fantasy or science-fiction setting and how this change in setting influences reader immersion, the moral lessons learned from the story, and the protagonist's reactions to the time loop itself. Additionally, as my research focused only on works narrated by a female protagonist that were written by U.S. women authors, it could be worthwhile for future research to explore which influence the issue of gender has on time loop narratives in the young adult genre.

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Table of Figures[2]

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2   All figures used in this thesis were created by me.