

## Charting a Dream: The Spatial and Textual Structure of E. E. Cummings' *Him*

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### Abstract:

**Early critics of E. E. Cummings' *Him* usually reproached the play for lacking both structure and message, while they usually only cursorily remarked – if at all – the role that dreaming played in it, often just to account for the lack of conventionally imagined structure. In this paper, I point out that the play has a tangible structure both textually and spatially, one that is organized around the dream of one of the play's characters. Furthermore, I show that the striking qualities of the play spring not from the supposed lack of structure, but rather from the very foregrounding of its structuredness.**

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In the following essay I deal with the play *Him* by E. E. Cummings. First, I show that while the play is often criticized for lacking a proper structure, it actually does have a tangible one. Based on reviews by S. Foster Damon and John Dos Passos, on some remarks by Norman Friedman, and an actual close reading of the play, I sketch its structure. I provide two parallel structures, one spatial, the other textual. In case of the textual structure, I prove that the play is divided into three easily distinguishable parts: the play-in-the play, the scenes that take place in the room, and the scenes with the Fates. Furthermore, I point out that the basic situation on which the play is built is the dream of the character Me, in the position of the doctor and patient, or the analyst and the analysand. In connection with the spatial structure, my findings are the following: this structure is self-repetitive, the space of the play turns into itself, in the form of a loophole. Furthermore, connected to that, I prove that the reason why early critics did not appreciate the play is not its lack of structure, as they claimed, but precisely the opposite: the play, instead of letting the spectators sink into a passive, story-minded reverie, foregrounds its structure, its inner workings and calls for a structure conscious act of reception.

Early critics of *Him* usually reproached the play for lacking structure and message, being without any meaning or sense whatsoever. John Hyde Preston, for one, claimed that “Cummings [...] has little regard for meaning and sense,” and that this play “is not a play at all, but a mess of formless talk with not a very clear idea behind it” (Preston 1984:52-3). An anonymous reviewer for the magazine *Variety* wrote that “‘Him’ is the most incoherent play ever mounted” (Norman 1972:228), while George Jean Nathan claimed that it “is incoherent, illiterate, preposterous balderdash” (Nathan quoted in Norman 1972:226). While the general opinion as to the actual merits of the play has changed considerably since then, *Him* has still not gained full acceptance. Not even amongst Cummings scholars, who tend to reserve their comments about the play to a few sentences, or at most a few pages in their studies that generally deal with other aspects of Cummings’ oeuvre. Although no one really claims that the play is without merits, it seems that analyses or essays devoted solely to the play can be found but scarcely.

Let us take a look at how the actual understanding of the play has changed over time, though. S. Foster Damon claimed in 1928 that the main characters are not characters proper, but rather two aspects of the same mind, the Jungian aspects of Persona and Anima (Damon 1984:54). In his short review that appeared in the *Saturday Review of Literature*, Damon highlights the possibility of the

play's close link with psychoanalysis, or in this case analytic psychology, rather.<sup>1</sup> Right after that, however, Damon's reading runs into difficulties when he states that the “drop-scene represents the outer Consciousness, where the Anima is being anaesthetized by the doctor (or 'Censor')” (Damon 1984:54). Now, if one ignores, for the time being, his cursory remarks in parentheses about the doctor possibly standing for the Censor, the sentence hardly makes any sense: the Anima as an unconscious “aspect” – to use Damon's terminology – cannot directly appear at “the outer Consciousness”, and it cannot be anaesthetized by the doctor, for at least two reasons: Firstly, because he has no direct access to it, and secondly, because something which only has a meta-psychological existence cannot be anaesthetized, only a person can be. By adding the words enclosed in parentheses, however, the case does not become any clearer or less contradictory, either. In analytic terms, the censor does not belong to consciousness, as it is a function of the preconscious. Furthermore, restricting the characters of the play to various functions of the human psyche seems more an oversimplification than an actual aid in “deciphering” the play.<sup>2</sup> In addition, such an interpretation would play down or even eradicate the situation which is that of a doctor and a patient, thereby cutting the characters from a particularity that might prove important.

Roughly at the same time as Damon's writing, there appeared another favorable review, or even apology, in the *Times* by John Dos Passos. Curiously enough, he also hinted at psychoanalysis, but this time in a much less specific manner, and also curiously enough, referring to the ideas of Freud, rather than Jung: the play, in his opinion, “is not built, like a detective story, out of a succession of events hung on the plot like a string. Its method is much more that of a Freudian analysis of a dream” (Dos Passos quoted in Norman 1972:224). Although Dos Passos clearly refers to the analysis of a dream, it is important to note that it only happens in relation to the structure of the play, or rather as an apology for the seeming lack of it. The texture is not that of a play, but that of the material that comes up in analysis, it has a deep structure based on the free association of signs, but nothing more graspable or concrete. It remains for the reader or the spectator (or analyst) to come up with a coherent surface structure.

It seems logical, however, to take the assumption of John Dos Passos a little bit further, and consider dream analysis not only as the method, but also as the basic situation of the play. The pair of the doctor and the patient can be substituted for analyst and analysand, and anaesthetizing for hypnosis. While this may seem a bit far fetched at first, there is indeed ample evidence in the play that would allow for such a reading. First of all, the situation where the “doctor” is standing above the sleeping patient appears in the very first scene of the play, and reappears for the last time in Act III Scene IV, exactly three brief scenes before the end of the play. This way, the situation of the doctor standing over the patient, serves as a frame of the action in-between. (However, it appears at other times, as well, for example in Act I Scene V.) Furthermore, up till the end of Act III Scene IV, the eyes of the patient remain closed, and only then and there does she wake up. The very fact that she is sleeping, positively suggests that what happens in the play is dreamed by her. As for the plausibility of thinking about this scene as that of the basic analytic situation, the play is full of references to Freudian psychoanalysis. In Act I, Scene II, there appears a charming example of the Freudian slip:

ME: I'd like to read it, anyway. Have you got it in your hump?

HIM (*Jumps*): What?

ME: — Pocket, I meant.

HIM: My God, have I a hump? (*Rising*): Here, let me look. (*Starts toward the invisible mirror*) (Cummings 1970:8)

There is also a direct reference to Freud by one of the three Weirds who usually appear together with the doctor. One weird says: “By reading the gospel according to Saint Freud” (Act I Scene V). Another such reference is in Act II Scene VI, where an Englishman is “staggering under a huge trunk marked FRAGILE”:

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<sup>1</sup> Since the schism between Jung and Freud, followers of Jung have been referring to their field as analytical psychology, rather than psychoanalysis.

<sup>2</sup> For further elucidation about the psychoanalytic topography of the human psyche see Freud 1991 and Jung 1976.

PLAINCLOTHESMAN: Drop wutchugut nmake it quick get me?

ENGLISHMAN (*Despairingly*): I'm afraid I don't in the least know what you mean—

PLAINCLOTHESMAN: I mean leggo wid boat hans one after duhudder nleave duh res tuh gravity.

ENGLISHMAN: But you don't seem to understand — it's my — don't you realize? It's a part of myself — my unconscious — which you're asking me to let go of, to drop. Could anything be more impossibly ridiculous?

PLAINCLOTHESMAN: Sie lissun I doan givuh good god dam fuh youse “Un-con-shus.” Nlemme tellyuh sumpn doan gimme no more uh youse lip r'll make uh hole in youse.

ENGLISHMAN (*Agonized, wails*): But I CAN'T — (*The PLAINCLOTHESMAN fires: there is no explosion, but the ENGLISHMAN drops the trunk. As it lands, a terrific crash of broken glass is heard. The ENGLISHMAN, blinking, begins dusting himself; speaks severely.*) There — you see what you've done. (Cummings 1970:56).

With such explicit and common references to psychoanalysis, it seems rather well grounded to imagine it possible that the doctor can be taken for an analyst who is carrying out an operation not on the body (or not only), but rather on the soul (or psyche) of the woman. Whether or not the actual situation is an analytic one, it seems logical to settle on the thesis that the action of the play occurs in the dream of the sleeping woman patient. A fact that explains why the female protagonist is called Me, and the male Him. The reason is that the action of the play is focalized by Me. Whatever the spectators see, they see it from her perspective. The dreams in the play are all her dreams, and the play is her play proper. This actually has direct textual support in the play. When Him talks about the play he is writing, Me notes in Act I Scene IV that “I'll write a play myself—all about policemen and shootings and mirrors” (Cummings 1970:22). Even the topics that she mentions are featured in the play, all of them.

With this in mind, it becomes possible to trace the structure of the play. This structure is first and foremost spatial, that is, it is structured around various localities. First, there is the space of the anesthetizing which is obviously not in the patient's mind. Whenever this situation is seen, there also appear the three Weirds and their idle chatter. The three Weirds are easily recognizable as the three Fates or Moirae. As Williams Slater Brown remarked in his answer to John Hyde Preston's unfavorable review, the passage “is uttered by one of the three Fates and is a travesty on the idiom and vocabulary of oracles and fortune telling. If Mr. Preston will read the first act of *Macbeth*, he will find the witches there talking in similar lyrical nonsense” (Slater Brown quoted in Norman 1972:213). In Cummings' play, however, the three Weirds never interact with the woman, or enter her sphere. This is further emphasized by the fact that the woman's face appears in a picture that depicts a woman anaesthetized by a doctor. The doctor, on the other hand, appears both in the picture and in the sphere of the Moirae, as well as in various other spaces. This points to the fact that although the lady being hypnotized and the three old women almost always appear together, they nevertheless do not appear in the same space. That is, we have the space of the dreamer, and the space of the Fates. Furthermore, Act I Scene II introduces a further sphere: that of the room (or mini-house), where the two protagonists, Him and Me, converse,<sup>3</sup> and live their lives. Another space is that of the play that Him is writing and recounting to Me: the sphere of that of the play within the play. In turn, the space of this other play is further subdivided into various other spaces: the empty space of this play in the play's first act, the three middle-aged men's space, the street corner, the office, the variety (Act II Scene V), Fifth Avenue, the symbolic Atlantic liner, the Roman villa, and the space of the city crowd. Furthermore, there are some further spaces that are not brought into existence by the play within the play: La Père Tranquille, and the circus (or the freak show).

Now, the case of the three Weirds is not easily decidable, they might be outside the dream of the character called Me, representing the passing of time and the flow of her life while she is sleeping, but she may just as well be dreaming about them, just like about the other figures. But because they always appear when there is a direct reference to Me sleeping, even if they are in her dream, their sphere is so close to that of the space outside Me's dream that they should be viewed as being in the

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<sup>3</sup> Me is the woman in the picture being anaesthetized.

outermost layer of the dream universe. It is clear that the space of the play in the play is subordinate to that of the room where Him and Me is living, as they create that space by their act of enunciation. The spaces in this play within the play cannot be understood as being in any relationship like that, as they seem quite unrelated, they are rather of the same importance and at the same level: spaces created by the play within the play are juxtaposed. The same can be said of the room and La Père Tranquille, but not of the room and the circus: it turns out in Act III Scene VI that the room comprises a subspace of the circus, being presented on the central pedestal of the circus' freak show: "The fifth platform [...] supports a diminutive room or booth whose front wall is a curtain" (Act III Scene VI).

One can recapitulate all that in the following manner: there is the outer layer of the sleeping patient; the next layer is the sphere of the Fates. Embedded in the Fates' sphere are the circus/freak show and La Père Tranquille.<sup>4</sup> The space of the room is a subspace of the circus/freak show. The space of the other play is a subspace of the room. Or more precisely the inner space of the characters enacting the play by pronouncing and/or imagining it. In contrast, the various localities of the play within the play are juxtaposed to each other (see Figure 1). The play then, is structured by these locations, these distinct spaces. It is important to note that the whole second act is nothing but the play within the play. It is not detachable though, as it remains in constant interaction with its environment, as the voices of Him and Me keep reflecting on the qualities and the "meaning" of this play within the play.

Him and Me's acts of continuous reflection show to what extent the early critics were mistaken when they criticized the play for lacking a noticeable structure. What indeed is the case is that the play does everything to make its very structured nature, its texture, noticed. It foregrounds its very createdness and alienates the spectator by its self-reflexivity. One of the devices for achieving this effect is the very use of the play within the play. By staging a play, Cummings' *Him* constantly refers back to the fact that what goes on is itself staged. The discussion of the merits of this other play by Him and Me only further amplifies the feeling of alienation, as spectators are not allowed to sink into the comfortable daydream of the spectacle. The fact that the play within the play is – seemingly – nothing but sketches one after the other and lacks a coherent story also adds to the alienating effect. Just as the constant reappearance of the Doctor in this play within the play does: basically all of the key roles are played by the same actor/character. While in classical Greek theater the use of masks was an actual custom, modern theater-goers of the 1920s, as well as present audiences, are far from used to it, so the frequent use of this device by the play can also be listed as a feature that disrupts the process of identification. That it is not used through the whole play, but only occasionally, of course, further amplifies the striking, unfamiliar character of using masks. But even the very act of using this device becomes the target of ridicule, in Act II Scene IV, where the masks come off, revealing faces underneath that resemble other mask-faces. That is, even if the very presence of the use of masks would imply an effect of alienation, their removal, and the very focus of a whole scene on the identities of masks and the faces underneath the masks, is an act that turns the use of masks into a part of the story. The appearance of the three Fates in Act I Scene V, also effectively functions as a reminder for the spectators that the play and the spectacle is thoughtfully worked out, a work of art that has a structure, and its own logic, not to be confused either with that of narratives, or with everyday life. The appearance of Me's head in a painted cardboard picture with holes for the heads of people, the like of which could be found in popular tourist locations like Coney Island, as well as the very rotation of the room from scene to scene, are further cases in point. The most direct occasions of self-reflexivity, of course, are those when the actors address the spectators directly, or establish some connection with them. Such an occasion appears right at the beginning of the play in Act I Scene II:

*ME (whose head appeared in the picture, preceding scene) stands facing the audience just inside the invisible fourth wall. Her open eyes (which are focussed at a point only a few inches distant) and her gestures (arranging hair, smoothing eyebrows, etc.) as well as the pose of her body (which bends slightly forward from the hips) suggest to the audience that she is looking at her reflection in an invisible mirror which hangs on this invisible wall. (Cummings 1970:4)*

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<sup>4</sup> The sphere of the Moirae is always outer to the World they take care of.

Another such case is when in Act II Scene V, the Doctor – this time as “John Rutter, President pro tem. of the Society for the Contraception of Vice” (Cummings 1970:50) – spouts up from the third row of the audience, and mounts the stage to stop the actors from acting out an indecent scene. But the most striking and charming example of self-reflexivity is the very last scene, the ending of which is reprinted here:

HIM: But you're thinking something about this room, aren't you?

ME: Yes, I'm thinking something about this room.

HIM: I'm afraid that you'll have to tell me what you are thinking.

ME: Can't you guess? I'll give you time.

HIM: Time is the because with which some dolls are stuffed. No, I can't guess.

ME (*Quietly*): It has only three walls.

HIM (*Looks about him in astonishment*): Behind you—that's a wall, isn't it?

ME: That's one.

HIM: One—and what's there? (*Pointing to the door wall*)

ME: A wall.

HIM: Two—and there? (*Pointing over his shoulder to the window wall behind him*)

ME: Three.

HIM: Three—and what do you see there? (*Indicating the invisible wall*)

ME: People.

HIM (*Starts*): What sort of people?

ME: Real people. And do you know what they're doing?

HIM (*Stares at her*): What are they doing?

ME (*Walking slowly upstage toward the door*): They're pretending that this room and you and I are real. (*At the door, turning, faces the audience*)

HIM (*Standing in the middle of the room, whispers*): I wish I could believe this.

ME (*Smiles, shaking her head*): You can't.

HIM (*Staring at the invisible wall*): Why?

ME: Because this is true.

## CURTAIN

(Cummings 1970:138-9)

Returning to the actual question of structure, besides the spatial organization, one can list the recurrence of scenes with the three Fates as structuring elements. They appear in Act I Scene I, also in Act I Scene III, further in Act I Scene V, as well as in Act III Scene II, together with Act III Scene IV, and finally in Act III Scene VI. It is easily recognizable that they do not appear in Act II, at all. This is not surprising, however, considering that Act II belongs to the play in the play. Furthermore, in Act I, every odd scene features these characters, while in Act III, they appear in every even scene. The structure of these two acts is identical in the sense that scenes in the room and scenes with the Fates alternate throughout, except for Act III Scene III, where the room scene is substituted by the scene in La Père Tranquille. As Norman Friedman notes, the structure of Act I is that of “two Him-Me scenes framed by three scenes involving the misses Weird” (Friedman 1969:55). The actual reversing of their order between the two acts turns this organization into a mirror structure. The Doctor appears in all the scenes of Act II, except for the very first non-scene, and in those acts in which the Fates also appear, plus in Act III Scene 3, the Père Tranquille scene which stands in for the room scene. (See Figure 2 for a table of the structure.) This structure means that the fates appear six times (exactly twice their actual number), the doctor fifteen times, while the room five times. This last number is actually the direct result of the fact that the room turns around during the play and in order to reach its original state it has to appear exactly five times.

The structure of Act II is, as mentioned above, very loose. It is made up of juxtaposed sketches. However, the first scene can easily be distinguished from the rest, as it is a non-scene, where the curtain goes up and immediately down, with some dialog afterwards, between Him and Me, that the audience can only hear. The structure of the remaining eight scenes is a framed structure, it starts and

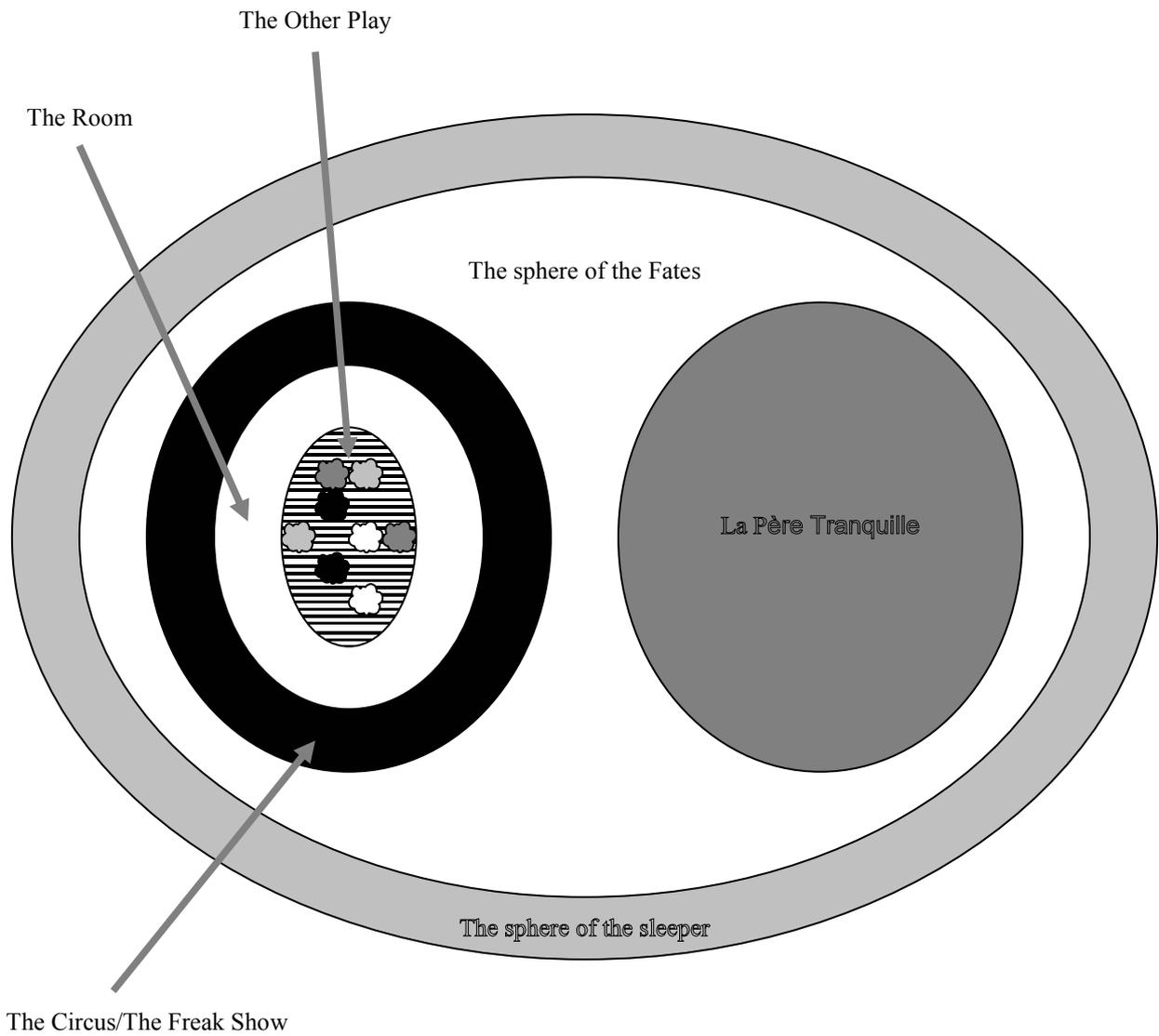
ends with scenes that both take place at an empty stage with no reference whatsoever to the actual place where the events happen (in Scene II), or with reference to an explicitly imaginary town (Scene IX). The rest of the scenes happen in tangible, actual places.

Norman Friedman's remark that "Me's eyes close at the beginning of Act I, and they open in the middle of the last act" (Friedman 1969:55) is one that points to something very important in terms of structure. This means that the spacial structure of the play becomes somewhat more complicated than the way I sketched it in Figure 1. The Circus/Freak Show and the Room must appear outside Me's dream space, as well. This, however, is not too easy to overcome. At first, it would seem logical to redouble the spaces of the Circus/Freak Show and the Room and allow for their existence outside dream space. It could easily be done with the Room, but the Circus/Freak Show is much more problematic. Instead of appearing as it is, outside Me's dream, it only appears in Him's daydream or imagination. As I note elsewhere, "the curtained, three-walled booth is not just any booth, but the home where the scenes of the rotating room happened. This way, the play refers to itself both textually and pictorially, creating an effect of mise-en-abyme" (Vernyik 2006). And this very mise-en-abyme makes the spatial structure of the play quite special. If there is a room in which Him is thinking of the Freak Show where on the pedestal there is the very room he is sitting in, it leads to an infinite spatial loophole. The space of the room turns into itself.

With all these remarks on the structure of the play, however, there still remains the question of its actual theme. There has not been much written about it, and even that which is available, is highly contradictory, and fragmented. A further point that might be of interest is how the fact that the focalizing entity of the play is Me might change Friedman's idea that this play "represents Cummings at his best, [...] for he portrays the wife's point of view as sensitively and sympathetically as his own, however limited it may seem from a more recent feminist perspective" (Friedman 1996:49). Does that change the understanding of *Me* in any way, and if it does, how? These are the lines along which I see the present paper extensible.

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**Figure 1 – The Play’s Spatial Structure**

| Act I    |          |          |          |          | Act II   |          |          |          |          |          |          |          |   | Act III  |          |          |          |          |          |          |
|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|---|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| 1        | 2        | 3        | 4        | 5        | 1        | 2        | 3        | 4        | 5        | 6        | 7        | 8        | 9 | 1        | 2        | 3        | 4        | 5        | 6        | 7        |
| <i>F</i> |          | <i>F</i> |          | <i>F</i> |          |          |          |          |          |          |          |          |   |          | <i>F</i> |          | <i>F</i> |          | <i>F</i> |          |
|          | <i>R</i> |          | <i>R</i> |          |          |          |          |          |          |          |          |          |   | <i>R</i> |          |          |          | <i>R</i> |          | <i>R</i> |
| <i>D</i> |          | <i>D</i> |          | <i>D</i> |          | <i>D</i> |   |          | <i>D</i> | <i>D</i> | <i>D</i> |          | <i>D</i> |          |
|          |          |          |          |          | <i>i</i> | <i>a</i> | <i>a</i> | <i>a</i> | <i>a</i> | <i>a</i> | <i>a</i> | <i>i</i> |   |          |          |          |          |          |          |          |

*F-Fates, D-Doctor, R-Room, i-imagined place, a-actual place*

**Figure 2 – The play's “textual” structure**