The Heart of Fate/Zero (GORMOTT PROVINCE LOWER LEVEL) (Protagonists theme)

“QUOTE.”

Consciously or otherwise, habituation is a concept that has great influence on how people interact with the world. Defined as the diminishing of a physiological or emotional response to a frequently repeated stimulus, it is a natural bi-product of sheer constant exposure to.. anything. Now, I’m aware that this may seem to be coming out of left field given the title of this video, but hear me out.

Simply put, habituation occurs when the human body adapts and buffers or shuts out a continuously firing stimulus of any kind. But what’s important is that that stimulus is constant and unchanging. For example, our pupils dilate to allow more light in when we’re in a dark place to see better, and they constrict when it’s bright for the opposite reason and same purpose. If you’re sitting on a chair or something similar right now, it’s likely that you did not consciously feel the chair underneath your fine ass until you heard me say this. Our neurons fire and we feel the chair and take note of this initially, but over time the stimulus fades and we become used to it, until the feeling of the chair fades away and we focus on other things.

Now, habituation is important because it translates over to media and stories as well - in terms of tone, approach and style. If a film has too many explosions and too much action without substance or variation to it, we become habituated and bored by the spectacle as these sequences lose their punch. If a story focuses on one tone for multiple arcs throughout, the result will be an experience that becomes tiring over time. This is partly why sports anime divide long, tense matches up with slice of life or comedy segments as a deliberate break from the action. This is also likely the reason that Hunter Hunter has so much tonal variation from arc to arc, with it’s writer, Yoshihiro Togashi, seemingly starkly opposed to inflexible stories.

But to the subject at hand - Too much misery without respite could leave the viewer feeling unfulfilled. If a very dark and dreary story does not have well-executed narrative, thematic or tonal variation, the constant exposure to this depressing atmosphere will likely make the audience less impacted by the tragedy and emotional lows than they would have if that story had it’s share of light. And that is why Waver and Rider are arguably the most important characters in Fate/Zero.

Ufotable’s anime, penned as a collaborative work between Gen Urobuchi and Kinoko Nasu, is clearly intending to be very dark and tragic, and this much is clear through just a summary of the characters and themes. Kiritsugu is constantly ominous and deeply sad, being forced to commit acts that he hates to carry out his goal. Saber and Irisviel’s relationship is indeed a bright one, but it is overshadowed by both Irisviel’s imminent death and gradually increasing weakness and Saber’s sad struggle to cling on to her ideals as she is constantly given reasons to abandon them. Kirei and Gilgamesh’s story is about giving into sadistic, destructive pleasure, Kayneth is an aristocratic, cruel, classist dickhead, Lancer is constantly reminded of his past sins and given no chance to properly atone and fight the beautiful fight he so desires, Tokiomi is a grim look into the traditions and sad customs of mages in this universe, RYunosuke and Caster are child killing psychopaths, Berserker is a man driven to insanity through not being punished for his wrongdoings, and Kariya’s story is an inhumanely cruel portrait of tragedy. While there is some small tonal balancing through Iri and Saber’s dynamics, Saber and Lancer’s relationship and the amusing dark wit of Gilgamesh, the prevailing trait of each of these characters is a dark or tragic one, and the effective atmosphere of the work makes this palpable in most scenes. The minor characters of Maiya, Sola-Ui, Rin, Sakura and Zouken all follow this pattern as well, and the fact that the majority of darker antagonistic characters ended the series positively and most protagonists were left devastated is telling. The futility and pointlessness of war, the foolishness of honour and sentiment, the sheer difficulty of redemption and, perhaps most prominently explored, the naivety of romantic ideals - these are all primary themes of the work, and these are all quite depressing if explored the way Fate/Zero explores them. There is a palpable feeling of hopelessness and failure that is encapsulated by these ideas and each character arcs previously described. This is a brutal story. But what’s key is that it is not too brutal, at least in my humble opinion. Overall, it is a gut-wrenching tale, but it never crosses the line. Fate/Zero is not needlessly grim, and the interjection of Rider/Waver sections is very deliberately done to ensure this. Simply put, this story would have been far too dark without this partnership.

There is never a segment of story that goes on too long or ends up being too bleak before the duo are reintroduced, and the vast majority of these instances are significantly less depressing than ones with other characters, with the charming, funny banter between the two being both natural and a welcome respite. But what truly helps these two to balance the story so well through their light is the essence of their characters and relationship dynamics, and how starkly these elements contrast nearly everything else.

Waver is a simple young man desperate to prove himself. He wants respect, he wants people who look down on him to see that they’re wrong and he wants to show that potential is not dependent on class or which generation of mage one is. He has pretty substantial insecurities because of his lack of achievements but due to his endeavors, he is not crippled by them and he uses them to drive forward. Quite simply, he wants to achieve important things to stand on his own two feet, something that isn’t easy in this setting. And the Holy Grail war is the perfect avenue for that.

On the other hand, Rider is quite clearly a born, charismatic leader. Outspoken, positive and brash, it is easy to see why he captures the hearts and spirits of those who follow him. Fixated on conquest and victory, his prevailing goal is to conquer the entire world and reach the shores of Oceanis, where he has never been before. He approaches this impossible dream with an admirable, some would say foolish persistence and due to this passion, he is characterized by an extreme idealism. And in a story that can very easily delve into nihilism, this is key.

Now, one would think that Waver having Rider as his servant would be great for someone who wants to win the grail. But in actuality, it does him no favours because Waver wants to win due to his own merits rather than because of the strengths of his servant.

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Him being gifted with such an impressive servant makes him even more insecure, because victory comes so easy to his partner. He feels dwarfed by the impressiveness of Rider. Waver wants to do more - he thirsts for agency and he is consumed by an inescapable need to prove himself right here and right now, to silence the doubters. He is desperate. However, Rider tells him to take life at it’s own pace. That he should set goals but not be in a rush to meet them. That he should enjoy life and be proud of the way he conducts himself and if he does so, the achievements that he will be proud of will come along naturally.

“” Big quote saying all this.

What’s most notable here is Rider’s admiration of Waver’s frustration and ambition. The boy dreams to achieve things bigger than himself, but being in a rush to achieve them will only lead to disappointment. Focus too hard on actually achieving difficult goals rather than the path to getting there and the value of those goals will pass you by. There is no need to worry so much about what others think of you. And in the here and now, Waver just needs to stick to what he’s good at, with no need to try to do more than he is capable of to try and impress. He need do no more than this to be a valuable asset to Rider.

There is no need to worry about being small and insignificant as long as one stands for something and has pride in their cause. Contrary to what Waver assumed, the two are teammates and equals, brothers in arms against the world. And this speech stirs something in Waver, helping him truly kickstart his development. Through these words and his many experiences, he learns to embrace his weaknesses, learn his strengths, value experiences and find his own worth in life aside from trying to look impressive to others for validation and reputation. Because of Rider, he is able to grow and take charge of his life. By the end we see leaps and bounds of development in Waver, and while Rider himself doesn’t receive too much development, he didn’t need it. He is a teacher, one who learns to respect Waver. It’s a dual character journey that is polar opposite in feel to the rest of the story. A give and take relationship, one of self-betterment. Learning to have confidence and see value in oneself, and as we’ll discuss in a minute, to enjoy the pursuit of ideals - it’s an intentional antithesis to the rest of the series and this balance is essential.

But as important as these two are for providing a narrative and thematic counterweight to balance the approach, their importance is not limited to their pseudo-mechanical function. What’s most significant about them is that through this contrast, they provide arguably the most prevailing theme that Fate/Zero has to offer. Not only would this story have been too dark to achieve the intended outcome without Waver and Rider, but they themselves are the prime display of the narrative’s main, overarching message. Without them, the story would have been a numbing tale about futility communicated through several parallel arcs - unfocused and scattered. But with them, we can see a quite different theme that is ironically not as brooding as one might assume. And it all has to do with Rider’s attitude towards reaching Oceanis, culminating with his realization and epiphany prior to his death.

As stated previously, every theme I listed earlier was about hopelessness in some way. But the story and arc of Waver and Rider turn those themes on their head to make this story ironically quite uplifting.

“Ep 2 3 mins - happy that he is so far from his goal. Spent his life trying to capture it nd its so puny.”

Rider has always been fixated on the journey to goals rather than the goals themselves. But he has always, always aspired to reach his promised land. The journey had always been more important than the destination, but Rider still wanted to reach his destination. It has always been part of his plan, despite his philosophy. But when his last hope was extinguished, he realized something about himself.

“Oceanis quote - the journey”

He sees here that he will never reach the shores of Oceanis. But.. he is okay with that. Because the trials, the suffering, the joys and the experience made the adventure a reward in itself. Glory lies beyond the horizon, and there is always another horizon. Rider breathes his last breath in pure satisfaction, realizing that not only was the chase far more fulfilling than the prize, but that he didn’t need the prize anyway. This reinforces and adds a twist to his words throughout the story - that maybe dreams aren’t meant to be achieved. As said by “commenter \_\_\_\_\_,” a dream loses all of it’s value when it becomes reality and as such, the dream should be something grand and larger than life itself - the exact way Waver approached his ambitions (though again, his earlier rushed desperation is discouraged). The importance is in how unobtainable it is. DOn’t be afraid to live for a dream that is impossible while knowing that it is impossible. Once you reach a smaller goal, set another one immediately and never stop the endless pursuit that is life. Constantly learning, constantly growing and constantly living. Rider lived his entire life like this and passed it on to Waver, who becomes much less focused on some end goal and more concerned with enjoying the ride. The never ending dream.

“Okeanis, the never ending dream. He said that when it was achieved, you keep going. It’s never over. We are tiny and insignificant, the world is grand and there is always some grand battle out there waiting to be fought. “Map/bowing quote” Episode 13)”

And again, this is in clear opposition to those in the story who failed and ended their pursuit in tragedy after fully expecting, or at least hoping for success in their end goal. Contrasting Saber, who valued her goal so much that failure crushed her. And Lancer, who was robbed of his beautiful battle. And Kiritsugu, who was left devastated after believing that the grail would deliver him from all of his suffering and sins.

There is great meaning in the fact that these two were the only protagonistic characters who achieved fulfillment with ideals intact and were actually benefitted by the experience. That in the face of darkness, conflict, strife and insurmountable odds, the most value can be derived from persistence and pursuit. From ideals themselves, happiness can be found - which is appropriate for a narrative that focuses on ideals more than arguably anything else. Ironically, this theme is also backed up by Kirei and Gilgamesh, who resolve to live life for it’s little pleasures by the end.

It all adds depth, duality and richness to the themes of the series that really helps it to distinguish itself. Once again, it’s all about this contrast from Waver and Rider to counter the habituation regarding themes of futility to shine a light on the series. And through this, the story forms it’s thesis through the one partnership that realized the usefulness of idealization and unreachable dreams, the two that never allowed themselves to be crushed by the burden of expectations. Many thanks for watching.

“Glory lies beyond the horizon.”