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The Use of Time Reorder as a Literary Plot Device

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Abstract

The concept of time is deeply rooted within the field of literature; not only does it present itself in literary works in the form of theme or symbol. It can also be viewed in the reflection of the time in which the piece was written; but, most importantly in the context of this paper, it plays an essential and indispensable role as a plot device when constructing the narration. The modification of these expressions of time varies in accordance with the author's views and purposes for their literary work. Thus, instances of toying with the base structure of time flow occur. This paper aims to display the employment of time reordering as a plot device in order to conclude whether this manner of writing was beneficial to the works in which it is depicted. This analysis will take into consideration a variety of advantages that time reordering could provide, from adding a sense of mystery, chaos, or irony, to much more intricate plot, structure or even subtext benefits. To be able to encounter all of the mentioned benefits, this paper will discuss a selected number of fictional literary works from the Gothic-like historical novel *Hawksmoor* by Peter Ackroyd to the contemporary novel *The Stone Gods* by Jeanette Winterson. The term of time reordering within this paper will refer to the abandonment of a linear plot line and the approach of multiple timelines or a hazardous presentation of events.

Keywords: time reordering, timeline, literary device, chronology, history

Introduction

Time and temporality dictate over fiction much more than one would assume, for it provides the narration, the sequence of events that form the plot line. From the moment the construction of the narrative plot starts, temporality needs to be taken into consideration, since "there are different degrees of temporal organization" (Ricoeur, 1980, p. 170) which an author could utilize within their work. This paper will focus on a specific temporal organization pattern, that of time reordering; however, before delving into this idea, a difference between linear plot line and chronology must be established.

While time reordering denies the idea of a linear narration structure, the plot is still highly dependent on chronology. The term of 'linear plotline' refers, as the name itself suggests, to the narration that arranges the events in the same order as their happening; thus, presenting one single action thread that the reader must follow. This singular thread offers all of the information needed along the way at the exact time of their emergence. On the other hand, chronology does not entail this rigid arrangement of events within the narration. Even if the sequence of action is presented in an alternative manner, when piecing all of the events together a chronology is still achieved in order for the narration to gain a logical sense. This is due to the fact that chronology can and should be associated with the idea of cause-and-effect which dictates the coherence and intelligibility of the plot.

Despite the fact that authors might choose to separate and present the two, cause and effect, in a disorderly manner in hopes of achieving a sense of mystery or confusion, with the unveiling of the entirety of the plot the reader is able to rearrange the events in a linear manner and observe that the order of causality was followed all along. Sternberg (1990) defines a plot being chronological in the following manner: "the sequence of events is followable, intelligible, memorable, indeed chrono-logical" (p. 903).

Schism of Time in Ackroyd's *Hawksmoor*

Moving on to the body of the paper, the first section of the article will be constructed on Ackroyd's novel *Hawksmoor*. In the context of this literary work, time will be addressed as a focal theme, as an essential plot device, as well as the element according to which the novel is divided into chapters. The second section of the paper will discuss time and its importance within Jeanette Winterson's novel *The Stone Gods*. These novels have been selected due to the fact that not only does time represent a shaping element of the plot, but also because the arrangement of time plays an essential role when analysing the structural integrity of the novel. Thus, both novels perfectly encapsulate the idea conveyed by Sternberg (1990) in the following quote "For narrative must tell about the workings of time (events, developments, changes of state) in some time-medium […] but not perforce in their original order of time" (p. 902).

As mentioned above, the first novel to be discussed within this paper is Ackroyd's historical work *Hawksmoor*, which might appear at first glance as a typical detective novel; however, when analysed in depth it emerges as an intricate and multi-layered novel. This becoming even more obvious when the theme of time is tackled, for time appears in the form of history rewriting and distortion. In the context of this particular novel

Ricoeur's (1980) understanding of time as "historicality" will offer a theoretical starting point, for Ackroyd in his novel employs this form of temporality proposed by Ricoeur (1980) that "springs forth in the plural unity of future, past, and present" (p. 171).

In addition to this, it would also be beneficial to include three theoretical ideas: the process of emplotment; the practical past as seen from Hayden White's theories of writing history; and the historiographic metafiction as composed and presented in Hutcheon's work with the same title.

White's theory of emplotment will be the first of the theoretical concepts to be approached in the context of Ackroyd's *Hawksmoor*. White discusses and proposes the idea of emplotment in his work *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (1975). Within this work White presents a brief context, namely that historians of the time wished to distance themselves from rhetoric and fiction, and preferred to view history as a pseudo-science, as an objective, truthful and factual field of study. The purpose of White's work is to present his view on the relation between fiction and history. However, before presenting his own beliefs, he summarizes the conclusions of many other thinkers such as Heidegger or Foucault, who "have cast serious doubts on the value of a specifically historical consciousness, stressed the fictive character of historical reconstruction and challenged history's claims to a place among the sciences" (White, 1975, pp. 1–2). Starting from this, White goes on to explain his perspective according to which historical work is "a verbal structure in the form of a narrative prose discourse" (1975, p. 2). Thus, it can be stated that White perceives history as "finding, identifying or uncovering the stories that lie buried" (White, 1975, p. 6). Similarly, Hutcheon also defines history writing as "narrativization (rather than representation) of the past" (1989, p. 8).

White depicts historians as writers that explain the past; hence going against the wishes of historians and rather supporting history's fictive character. This train of thoughts leads him to his emplotment theory, according to which each historian organizes sequences of events in their own manner, they construct their 'story plot' according to their own understanding of the events—he emphasizes that the same historic event can be recounted in different manners by different historians—thus, history as a whole, gains a subjective quality. White proposes four modes of emplotment: Romance—"drama of the triumph of good over evil" (1975, p. 9), Tragedy—"the fall of the protagonist and the shaking of the world he inhabits" (1975, p. 9), Comedy—"reconciliations of the forces at play in the social and natural world" (1975, p. 9), and Satire—"a drama dominated by the apprehension that man is ultimately a captive of the world" (1975, p. 9).

White continues to discuss the relationship between history and fiction in his work *The Practical Past* (2014), in which he goes as far as to separate the past into two distinct categories: the historical past, and the practical past. According to White the notion of 'historical past' is "a highly selective version of the past" (2014, p. xiii) that nobody truly experienced or lived due to the fact that it only ever exists within "the books and articles published by professional historians" (2014, p. 9). On the other hand, the 'practical past' deals with "memory, dream, fantasy, experience, and imagination" (White, 2014, p. 10). Thus, this practical past is "a past which, unlike that of historians, has been lived by all of us" (2014, p. 14). White presents this separation between the two in order to connect in a seamless way history with the historical novel, for he claims that it is the practical past that is used within these novels, because as mentioned previously the historical past exists only in history books. The practical past allows for the freedom of the writer's creativity, presenting them with the possibility to alter or distort historical information according to their experiences, memories, and imagination.

Continuing on from the idea of historical fiction, Hutcheon (1989) goes a step beyond in her work "Historiographic Metafiction Parody and the Intertextuality of History" in order to present her take on the relationship between history and fiction. "The postmodern relationship between fiction and history is an even more complex one of interaction and mutual implication. Historiographic metafiction works to situate itself within historical discourse without surrendering its autonomy as fiction" (Hutcheon, 1989, p. 4). From this quote the connection between historiographic metafiction, emplotment and the practical past is apparent; all of them tackle the employment of history in novels, as well as the idea of subjectivity within history itself and its writings. "The Writer of historiographic metafiction finds that not only literature and the external world, but also history, so far considered the most objective human creation, are similarly subjective" (Jaén, 1991, p. 31).

Hutcheon goes as far as to say that history's "loss" of objectivity should not be viewed as a negative but as a positive; for it summons critical thinking, challenging the reader to discern between factual truths, and the personal truths of various historians portrayed in their writings. This forces the reader into a state of awareness that objectivity and transparency are unattainable.

> If the discipline of history has lost its privileged status as the purveyor of truth, then so much the better, according to this kind of modern historiographic theory: the loss of the illusion of transparency in historical writing is a step toward intellectual self-awareness that is matched by metafiction's challenges to the presumed

> transparency of the language of realist texts. […] This does not in any way deny the value of history-writing; it merely redefines the conditions of value in somewhat less imperialistic terms. (Hutcheon, 1989, p. 10–11)

Now that these theoretical aspects of the paper have been explained in such a manner that they will aid the analysis of *Hawksmoor*, the focus of the paper will shift to Ackroyd's novel. Having in mind the abovementioned theories, it becomes apparent that Ackroyd employs veridic, factual, accurate historical information within his novel—the character of Christopher Wren, the Plague, the event of the Great London Fire that subsequently led to the building of churches—"The odd chapters are historically accurate in that they refer to specific times, places, events and even characters that really existed at the time." (Jaén, 1991, p. 32) Employed as well are distorted historical facts—the historical figure of Nicholas Hawksmoor underwent a number of modifications, the addition of the fictional 7th church and many other. Thus, it can be stated that *Hawksmoor* can be defined using Jaén's (1991) understanding of a historiographic metafiction, for "Historiographic metafiction [novels] do not seek historical accuracy and realistic verisimilitude, on the contrary, evince a longing for the return to the relish in story telling" (Jaén, 1991, p. 31).

Even more so, Ackroyd's inclusion of historical figures and events, leads to the creation of his own version of the past, therefore achieving an alternative or distorted history. This alternative form of history is the perfect example, thus accentuating White's idea that there are as many histories as there are historians. This is best seen through the character of Nicholas Dyer, who is meant to encompass the historical figure of Nicholas Hawksmoor to a certain degree. Ackroyd changes the surname to Dyer, he alters the birth and death dates of the character—Hawksmoor the architect lived between the years of 1661–1736; while the fictional character lived between 1654–1715—as well as the place of birth; Dyer in the novel was born and grew up in London "I was born in this Nest of Death and Contagion" (Ackroyd, 1993, p. 48). This distortion of historical information with addition of imagination is exactly what White defined as the practical past utilized within novels.

Ackroyd goes even further with his alterations to the point that he 'splits' the architect Nicholas Hawksmoor into two characters belonging to two distinctive time periods. Nicholas Dyer encompasses the historical figure through his career as an architect, through his connection as an apprentice of Christopher Wren, and through his work of building the Churches as well as the time period in which he exists; in this respect, the two—the character and the real human being—appear to have many similarities. On the other hand, at first glance, detective Nicholas Hawksmoor seems to only share the name with the historical figure—his career is that of detective, not architect; he lives in the twentieth century

rather than the eighteenth. However, upon a complete read of the novel and an in-depth understanding of its ending it becomes apparent that the two fictional characters are one and the same entity, simply different reincarnations; thus "through the several different accounts of Nicolas Dyer´s life that are presented in different chapters, Ackroyd emphasizes the interpretative quality of history" (Hutcheon qtd in Nedvědová, 2018, p. 51).

This final epiphany that the two are the same, which the reader can only fully grasp at the end of the novel, is a metatextual way through which Ackroyd presents this idea of reconstruction of chronology or piecing back together events given in an unorderly manner in order to form a whole. "For it is only when the sequence has been delimited by art, to whatever effect, that its initial and terminal points lend themselves to lifelike, chrono-logical bridging from early to late and from cause to result" (Sternberg, p. 933).

Due to this 'split' of the historical figure into the two main characters, the novel has a unique narration style, for it is divided in two time periods, each being characterized by a narration that is suitable, preferred, and typical for its timeline. All of the odd chapters—which take place in and present the eighteenth-century timeline—are narrated in first person from the perspective of Dyer as he writes the course of his life within a journal. This narration adheres to the eighteenth-century narration techniques and language, for Ackroyd employed in his writing the talking manner and spelling of that time period which can be seen from the very beginning of the novel "And so let us beginne; and, as the Fabrick takes its Shape in front of you, alwaies keep the Structure intirely in Mind as you inscribe it" (Ackroyd, 1993, p. 7).

In an interview, Ackroyd addressed this specific type of writing present in the odd chapters and stated that "With Hawksmoor, for example, when I was imitating early eighteenth-century speech, I found it was the one sure way in which I entered the period fully, it came alive" (Ackroyd and Wolfreys, 1999, p. 110).

By contrast, the even chapters, which construct the twentieth century timeline, are narrated from a third perspective of an omniscient narrator and utilize conventional language for the time. The second chapter itself starts with a 'modern' idea—that of a tour guide leading a group through London—"Their guide had stopped in front of its steps and was calling out, 'Come on! Come on!'" (Ackroyd, 1993, p. 27).

Before going further to talk about each of the timelines in detail, an important aspect to mention is the manner in which these two timelines add an ironical sense of mystery as well as incipient confusion to the novel. When starting the novel, the split in timeline and alteration between the two periods presented come abruptly and without any warning.

The effect Ackroyd most likely wished to achieve is confusing the reader, creating a sense of unease that will prevail throughout the novel. The split in timelines makes the reader question the novel itself, as well as the integrity of any of the information depicted within it; all of this adding to the idea of history being unreliable, which is one of the main themes of the novel.

Additionally, in the instance of this novel, the reader has more information than the characters. The reader is aware of who the murderer is, unlike in normal detective novels in which the reader and the characters discover information at the same pace. Due to this it could be argued that there is no detective or mysterious aspect from this perspective; precisely because the detective lacks this information and the split in timelines will never allow him to fully comprehend the situation; thus, leading to an irony of the 'failed' detective.

As mentioned previously, the eighteenth-century timeline is narrated by the main character, Dyer, in his journal, and it encompasses history through the prism of his experience, which can be understood, according to White's theory, as the use of practical past. Hence, it can be stated that Ackroyd does not utilize the practical past only when composing the novel as a whole, by including veridic information and changing them so that they fit the story he wishes to convey, but he employs it even in the universe of the story. Dyer too uses the practical past, his narration is also divergent from 'what actually' happened within the novel, since his recollection is that of his own experience and memory of past events. Dyer's use of practical past combines fact with memory, while Ackroyd's combines fact with imagination—the two distinct uses being easily differentiable.

Two main events through which Dyer's practical past can be seen are the detailed recounts of the 1665 Plague and the Great Fire of London from 1666, both of these are depicted from the memory of the teenager Dyer. "There was a Band of little Vagabonds who met by moon-light in the Moorfields, and for a time I wandred with them; most of them had been left as Orphans in the Plague" (Ackroyd, 1993, p. 49). It could be argued that through the journal and through Dyer's subjective narration Ackroyd wishes to highlight the unreliability of history. In this respect, he seems to be agreeing with Hutcheon's claim that history cannot be referred to as an objective science; as well as with White's theory about emplotment, since each historian recounts the events according to their own perspective. The reader is left with no other choice of gaining insight into Dyer's character but to believe a—possibly unreliable—version of his life (Sağlam, 2011). By taking this approach Ackroyd exemplifies the view that writers of historiographic metafiction have on history, namely that "history, so far considered the most objective human creation, [is] similarly subjective" (Jaén, 1991, p. 31).

In regard to the twentieth century timeline the themes that this paper will discuss are that of reincarnation, cyclicity, and time. Due to this cyclic movement that takes place within London's borders, the practical past can also be found within this timeline, and it could be understood in this context as memory—in this case the world and humanity's memory. Humanity appears to repeat itself endlessly, as seen through the similarities between the two time-lines: all of the victims—the ones sacrificed for the building of the Churches in the eighteenth century and the murder victims from the twentieth century—have similar if not identical names. Ackroyd employs alike images, structures, and even sentences seem to be repeated from one century to the other in order to "emphasise the circularity of life in London" (Nedvědová, 2018, p. 56). However, the biggest similarity between the two comes in the form of the main character of each timeline.

> The twentieth-century detective, Nicholas Hawksmoor appears both the opposite and the complementary mirror image of the eighteenth-century architect, Nicholas Dyer: both lead solitary lives, have terrifying dreams, are aloof and reluctant to communicate and are interested in puzzles, both are dark haired and tall, both wear glasses which they accidentally break; both are betrayed by their assistants, and both have visions of themselves separate from their own bodies. (Jaén, 1991, p. 33)

Thus, London could be seen as a space stuck in a time loop, destined to witness the same characters, repeat the same actions, stating that history has a tendency to repeat itself. In the context of reincarnation Ackroyd decided to add some interesting similarities between the main character of Dyer and even some of the victims. For example, the first victim, Thomas Hill from the twentieth century timeline, shares similar interests with Dyer in regard to books. As a child Dyer's favourite read was *Dr. Faust* while Thomas enjoyed *Dr. Faust and Queen Elizabeth*. Due to this choice of connecting not only Dyer with Hawksmoor but Thomas Hill—especially since Hawksmoor only appears in the novel after the death of Thomas from the twentieth century; thus, no two reincarnations seem to coexist at the same time—the depth and complex build of the theme of reincarnation emerges once more. "Dyer, then, has undergone a series of reincarnations, experiencing all kinds of lives as a murderer and as the murdered man, as a criminal and as a detective" (Jaén, 1991, p. 41).

Even the idea of passage of time itself is denied, for Ackroyd characterizes the space of the seventh Church as one outside of time. Dyer's character died in 1715 in that Church, but two centuries later, when Hawksmoor enters the church, Dyer as an entity is still there, proving that the Church was frozen in time. The novel ends with the meeting and unification of the two characters—Dyer and Hawksmoor—to prove that they are one

and the same and with their unification the cycle will restart. "And then in my dream I looked down at myself and saw in what rags I stood; and I am a child again, begging on the threshold of eternity" (Ackroyd, 1993, p. 208). Thus, this ending quote of the novel does not only emphasizes these themes of reincarnation and time, but it could be also interpreted as the perfect ending of the 'Satire' mode of emplotment proposed by White, for it displays how the world controls the characters, how they are mere victims of this time loop. "In the novel, nothing progresses in time, the same events repeat themselves endlessly, and the same people live and die only in order to be born and live the same events again and again" (Jaén, 1991, p. 33).

Ciclicity of Time in Winterson's *The Stone Gods*

The next section of the paper will focus on Winterson's work *The Stone Gods*, which similarly to *Hawksmoor* is a literary piece split into different timelines in accordance with its chapter structure. *The Stone Gods* is comprised of three different timelines, one timeline corresponding to each of the first two chapters, while chapter three and four compose the third and last timeline. In the context of this novel this paper will focus on the topic of circular time, or repetition. "Repetition thus tends to become the main issue in narratives in which the quest itself duplicates a travel in space that assumes the shape of a return to the origin" (Ricoeur, 1980, p. 185).

Within her science-fiction novel *The Stone Gods* Winterson plays with the idea of time on multiple layers in order to present the idea of cyclicity as seen through Captain Handsome's theory of "A repeating world—same old story" (Winterson, 2008, p. 40). This theory has the purpose of connecting the incipient chapter with the following three; hence, Captain Handsome and the idea of repetition are crucial elements for the novel's coherency.

The novel presents three distinct planets in its incipient chapter: Orbus—on which humanity resides at the time; Planet Blue—which is an untouched and abundant planet towards which humanity wishes to move; and lastly, Planet White—which can be understood as the planet on which humanity resided in the past and that much like Orbus was slowly killed by humans and ultimately abandoned in favour of a new and virgin planet. Captain Handsome theorises that this cyclic movement of destroying a planet—moving onto another one; promising to do better and not repeat the same mistakes; only to destroy that new planet, and start all over again—represents human nature. It is a movement bound to repeat itself, one that humanity is unable to put an end to, for it happened way before them, even before Planet White, and a movement that will happen after Planet Blue just the same. "In these stories, repetition is constitutive of the temporal form itself" (Ricoeur, 1980, p. 186).

Another way through which this cyclicity could be understood is the arrangement of the distinctive timelines of the novel: the chapters are presented in chronological order; however, if they were to be rearranged in accordance with technological advancement, the first chapter would be at the end for it presents the most advanced society—thus the order would be chapter two, followed by chapter three and chapter four, and finally chapter one. This possibility of rearranging the chapters presents just how malleable time really is. Additionally, through the placement of chapter one at the end, it conveys the fact that the story may and will start all over again.

Due to the futuristic world building of the first chapter, which entails the most ancient time presented in the novel, Winterson manages to create a sense of confusion for the reader. The changes from one timeline to another are not as abrupt as those in *Hawksmoor*, initially due to the fact that Winterson does not alternate between the timelines every couple of pages, but rather 'completes' one timeline before jumping to the other. The completion of each timeline is done through the death of the main set of characters, only for them to be reborn into the next timeline.

All three timelines are connected as seen from the existence of Captain Cook's journal in the first chapter, the appearance of the story 'Stone Gods' in the last chapter, as well as the motif of the signal that Spike from Orbus left behind, which Spike from Earth hears, sixty-five million years in the future. Winterson plays and alters with the idea of linear timeline within this novel, even further implying that the chapters can be read any another order. "'Past and future are not separate as far as the brain is concerned' […] We split time into three parts. The brain, it seems, splits it twice only: now, and not now" (Winterson, 2008, p. 129–147).

This above mentioned quote from Winterson's novel depicts an issue with which many great thinkers have dealt with, namely

> Does time exist? […] Aristotle, Augustin and Henri Bergson, hesitated before answering that question. Their hesitation stemmed from the idea that the three elements of time, namely past, prese and future, are fleeting. They realized the past no longer exists, the future is not yet here, and the present is slipping by so quickly that it is impossible to grasp. (Jense, 2015, p. 1)

This view of time is one seen in Winterson's novel in the form of an uncertain future, the instability of the present—their need to abandon their planet for another one—and the irreversibility of the past—humanity cannot go back to a time prior to the slow destruction of their planet.

Captain Cook's journal, which represents the story of the timeline presented within the second chapter, exists within all three timelines; therefore, proving Spike's theory that memory transcends the human life. The journal not only survived and reached the future, namely the third narrative timeline happening on Earth, but it managed to go beyond time and reach into the past as well, for the journal appears on the Ship in the first timeline when the main cast of characters leave Orbus. The presence of Captain Cook's journal within the first timeline also provides the context for Captain Handsome's above mentioned theory according to which the universe and humanity are fated to repeat themselves endlessly. Due to this repetitive and cyclic movement it could also be stated that time itself is not linear but rather a circle, which would explain to a certain degree the journal's existence in the past.

Perhaps another perspective from which the time organization within Winterson's novel should be seen is that presented by Jense in which he "states that time is a 'stretched now' that is heterogeneous, discontinuous, and ambiguous" (Jense, 2015, p. 17). In this instance, the time seen in the fourth chapter would not be split, but rather taken as a "discontinuous, and ambiguous" (Jense, 2015, p. 17) whole, that represents the 'present.'

Conclusion

Similarly to the manner in which the end of *Hawksmoor* was interpreted earlier on in the paper, the last sentence of *The Stone Gods* "Everything is imprinted for ever with what it once was" (Winterson, 2008, p. 149) could also be seen as a perfect ending of the 'Satire' mode of emplotment proposed by White. Actually, it displays how the world controls the characters, how they are mere victims of this time loop, thus reinforcing the idea of a circular time existence, or maybe better said that of repetition.

In conclusion, time is an essential plot device for its causality dictates the coherence of the plot; however, due to its pliability it also offers authors the opportunity to arrange the events into a hazardous manner without losing the integrity of the narration. Rather this rearrangement adds a sense of confusion and unease, creating the specific mood sought after by the author. By utilizing time in this manner writers are able to add another layer to their narration, a layer that needs to be deciphered; therefore, inviting the reader to be part of the narrative plot itself and to put together piece by piece all of the information they are given.

> To be sure, nobody who has thought about narrative structure and interpretation is likely to deny that for narrative to make sense as narrative, it must make chronological sense. For if the events composing it do not fall into some line of world-time, however problematic their alignment and however appealing their alternative arrangement, then narrativity itself disappears. (Sternberg, 1990, p. 903)

By analysing the two novels that tackled this idea of time rearrangement it becomes apparent that even within this type of temporal organization there are a number of manners in which the writers can toy with the timelines. Time seen in *Hawksmoor* essentially conveys the idea that the past and the present coexist, the events happen simultaneously, and the two timelines often intertwine. On the other hand, in *The Stone Gods* time is presented as a circle, a constant repetition of the same events, and exactly due to this reason the three timelines presented could be arranged in any manner for the plot to be intelligible.

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