

Discussing Time Through Literature

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Nowadays one of the most intriguing debates all over the world appears to be the ongoing battle between digital culture and the humanities. The liberal arts, both physically (due to the budget cuts) and mentally, find themselves engaged in a struggle for survival within the Information Age, which is marked by pervasive social media and an enormous reservoir of visual material and (dis)information. Furthermore, the encroachment of artificial intelligence—which, besides opening new horizons, mercilessly drains the creativity, patience, and fortitude of the younger generation, who are on their educational journey—exacerbates an already existing dilemma. Just as we begin to admit the inevitability of the new world that has been ‘loading’ since the beginning of the twenty-first century, the number of articles on the necessity and vitality of the humanities in our lives multiply with each day. As a literary scholar within the field of American studies, I celebrated each piece of writing that aimed at defending and excelling the nature and the significance of the humanities as a discipline. Although the circle of the ‘guardians’ has shrunk considerably, it is encouraging to see that there are people who still see the power of genuine literature. Hence, when I received the honorary invitation to be a professorial voice for this issue along with young talented scholars, I decided to use this chance to humbly evoke, once again, how literature can provide a multidimensional perspective on the essential elements of our lives, help us understand the deeper layers of our existence, and push ourselves beyond the borders and frames of our mind.

Probably one of the most perplexing and captivating but sometimes eerie concepts that we try to comprehend, yet frequently fail to, is time. Throughout human history, the conceptualization of this notion has undergone a profound evolution. St. Augustine was one of the pioneers who rendered its philosophical side and recorded his ideas in *The Confessions*. In it, Augustine asks, “What then is time? If no one ask of me, I know; if I wish to explain it to him who asks, I know not” (244). Plato’s metaphysical and Aristotle’s empirical approaches to the concept also acknowledged the significance of time. While Plato stressed the imperfection of the

material world and time's role in it, Aristotle underlined its connection to motion and change within the physical realm. Later, with the advent of monotheistic religions, philosophers continued to shape the understanding of time, infusing it with linear narratives and eschatological dimensions.

Besides going into the nature of time, philosophers also looked at the problem of its measurement. How do we measure time? By what means can we assess the passage of time? Again, Augustine questioned the whole process:

In what manner, therefore, may it be measured? And yet we measure times; still not those which as yet are not, nor those which no longer are, nor those which are protracted by some delay, nor those which have no limits. We, therefore, measure neither future times, nor past, nor present, nor those passing by; and yet we do measure times. (255)

Emphasizing the subjectivity and the fleeting nature of the present moment, Augustine added a drop in the ocean of discussions on the metaphysics of time. Subsequently, Kant, Hegel, Heidegger, Einstein, Ricoeur, Deleuze, and many other philosophers would add their original as well as revolutionary insights throughout the centuries.

Hence, before we lose ourselves in this philosophical labyrinth, I would like to bring the question to the table for our discussion and afterward provide some examples from several contemporary American novels. J. Hillis Miller, a prominent American scholar and literary critic, in his article "Time in Literature" asks:

If time is such an enigma, and if the word 'time' – even after the most stringent philosophical analysis – does not give us any sense of what lived human time is really like, if all words for time are doomed to be catachreses, how then can literature find ways of expressing and conveying to a reader this or that of the innumerable diversified experiences of human time? (89)

Miller continues his evaluation with a critical analysis of temporality in literature and dives into thematic representations and the rhetoric of temporality, while also providing examples of the spatialization of time and allegorical expressions within William Faulkner's novels. In particular, he focuses on *As I Lay Dying*, a novel that through its narrative structure and thematic elements offers an authentic exploration of temporal concepts such as memory, nostalgia, death, or cyclical time.

On the other hand, Mark Currie, in *About Time: Narrative, Fiction and the Philosophy of Time*, states that "there is also a need to revisit the relation of fiction and philosophy because of these strange temporal structures, to ask what domain of understanding or knowledge might be occupied by the contemporary novel on the subject of time, or what effects these structures might exert in the world" (1). Here, the author suggests that temporal structures within contemporary novels serve as a

meeting ground for fiction and philosophy, and that the evaluation of its nature can lead to a deeper understanding of both. However, what is more significant is that he specifically underlines its effects in the real world and implies that such elements within the novels, besides shaping our perspectives on time, can provide significant insights into the cultural or intellectual atmosphere of the present. Hence, several novels that I would like to mention here, besides triggering a philosophical perspective on time, are going to unveil substantial cultural, historical, or political issues within American society.

In 2021, Jason Mott's *Hell of a Book* received the National Book Award for Fiction. The full title of the novel, which is *Hell of a Book: Or the Altogether Factual, Wholly Bona Fide Story of a Big Dreams, Hard Luck, American-Made Mad Kid*, foreshadowed a story of the twenty-first-century Bigger Thomas or Invisible Man. Mott, through multiple points of view, wrote a perplexing story of an African American boy whom we see through different stages of life. Toward the end of the novel, when the reader is busy understanding which hero's version belongs to which stage, the author states that it does not matter and that the story we had read can happen to any Black boy in the United States. Another significant point that is underlined by the author is that it is a love story. Usually, after such a statement, the reader would expect a romantic story between two characters, but this time, the love that is mentioned by Mott is much more difficult because it is the love of our own Self. One of the targets of the author is to show how difficult it can be for African American people to value and respect themselves within a society that still lives with that color line mentioned by DuBois at the beginning of the twentieth century. That is why, at the end of the novel, the protagonist says:

I think learning to love yourself in a country where you're told that you're a plague on the economy, that you're nothing but a prisoner in the making, that your life can be taken away from you at any moment and there's nothing you can do about it – learning to love yourself in the middle of all that? Hell, that's a goddamn miracle. (318)

Basing his story on a family tragedy, Mott also manages to integrate national contemporary problems like the ongoing police violence and racism toward African Americans in the United States.

At some point in his journey, fraught with numerous existential and depressive tribulations, the protagonist stares at the meticulously prepared Post-it notes behind the back of a receptionist when he realizes how much time she must have spent to create meaning out of meaningless pieces of paper. Analyzing the perfect arrangement of colors and shapes, order and place, catalyzes a philosophical introspection within the hero:

Anything worthwhile takes time. Maybe that's what time is for: to give meaning to the things we do; to create a context in which we can

linger in something until, finally, we have given it something invaluable, something that we can never get back: time. And once we've invested the most precious commodity that we will ever have, it suddenly has meaning and importance. So maybe time is just how we measure meaning. Maybe time is how we best measure love. (Mott 68)

Just as he was not able to find the meaning of the book tour he was enduring and all those meetings with people who do not understand him or who pragmatically approach his success as a writer, he realizes that him spending time on seemingly valueless activities can create change in the long run. Deeply traumatized and alienated from his own identity and life, the hero, toward the end of the novel, realizes that it takes time to heal, to accept, and eventually to love. Hence, we measure time in the novel through the *effort* of people who, throughout centuries, fight for their identity, culture, values, families, and dreams.

Let us look at a completely different perspective provided by one of the most prominent Native American women writers, Louise Erdrich, whose *The Night Watchman* won the Pulitzer Prize in 2021. Through the firsthand information that she found in the letters of her grandfather, Patrick Gourneau, who served as tribal chairman for the federally recognized tribe of Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians for many years, Erdrich tells a real story from 1953 when the United States Congress announced House Concurrent Resolution 108. Through Thomas's struggle to prevent termination and another disaster in the history of Native Americans, the reader realizes the density of the conflict and the depth of the tragedy experienced by these people. Going through the text of the bill, Thomas is trying to prepare a defensive speech for Washington where they are planning to go to stop the termination process.

For days, he'd tried to make sense of the papers, to absorb their meaning. To define their unbelievable intent. Unbelievable because the unthinkable was couched in such innocuous dry language. Unbelievable because the intent was, finally, to unmake, to unrecognize. To erase as Indians him, Biboon, Rose, his children, his people, *all of us invisible and as if we never were here, from the beginning, here.* (79)

Despite its seemingly harmless language, the bill harbors an intent of profound negation and erasure directed at Native Americans and their community, ultimately culminating in a disturbingly thorough historical eradication. Erdrich skillfully portrays this clash between two cultures and the tragedy caused by American politics toward the indigenous communities.

One of the most significant characters developed by Erdrich is Zhaanat, the oldest and the wisest woman, who represents the community and culture of Native Americans. She is protected from boarding schools, cities, and other elements of the Americanization process. She is the one who projects the ancestry and universality

of the indigenous culture. Through her mystic posture, beliefs, and meditative rituals, Zhanaat shows us what time is according to her community. “You cannot feel time grind against you. Time is nothing but everything, not the seconds, minutes, hours, days, years. Yet this substanceless substance, this bending and shaping, this warping, this is the way we understand our world” (193). One of the major reasons for Chippewa people to reject termination is the land where their ancestors lived and, according to their beliefs, are still living. Ghosts and spirits are part of their life and culture that they honor and protect. There is no linear or chronological understanding of time, which is prevalent in Western cultures. Native Americans often see time as interconnected with the natural world, seasons, and cycles of life. The concepts of past, present, and future may not be as strictly delineated, but universality and that bond between ancestry and environment are emphasized. That is why time is not just a measurement of events or objects but the whole understanding of the world, *the absolute existence*.

On the other hand, Paul Auster in *Man in the Dark* (2008), a woeful and thought-provoking novel, projects time from a different angle. Auster, blurring the boundaries between fiction and reality, explores the interconnectedness between dreams and reality and shows how memory determines the state of mind of a human being. The protagonist of the story is an old man who is trying to recover from a car accident. Seized by insomnia and stuck to his bed, he creates a story in his mind, an alternative version of the US that had never experienced the 9/11 attack. Through this fictional line and the real stories that he tells his granddaughter in the middle of the night, he leads the reader to the actual trauma and tragedy that his family is trying to survive. Together with his daughter and granddaughter, they are trying to overcome the great loss of his granddaughter’s boyfriend, who was recruited and went to Iraq, where he was kidnapped and brutally beheaded. Auster explores the darkest corners of the human psyche and shows how past and guilt may go hand in hand to destroy the present and the future. There is a striking quote on the perception of time that reflects the author’s perspective: “time speeding ahead as the train speeds ahead, pushing us forward into life and then more life, but also time as the past, [...] the past that lives on in the present, the past we carry with us into the future” (Auster 78-79). Time, for Auster’s character, is the *baggage* he has to carry into the future, the *guilt* he has to cure, and the *wound* he has to heal. This man in the dark is trying to escape the image of a beheaded young man whose assassination he and his family happened to watch on a screen, a process “[i]mpossible to know how long it has lasted. Fifteen minutes. A thousand years” (176). The reader, besides visualizing the relativity of time that was revolutionarily presented by Einstein to humanity, also realizes how such deep traumas can terminate the flow of time, prevent someone from moving forward, and imprison the psyche into the darkness.

Quite similar trauma and guilt can be traced in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* when Sethe, who cuts her daughter's throat with a saw to protect her from slavery, faces her past on the porch of her alienated house. We feel her pain and guilt thinly veiled with justifications when she says: "Ten minutes for seven letters. With another ten could she have gotten 'Dearly' too?" (5). Probably one of the most disturbing descriptions of time in literature, a mother who bargains with a man who is going to carve her dead daughter's name on a tombstone. A mother who had to pay for this one word with her body but years later still wonders whether there was more that she could do if she could endure the torture for a few more minutes. Throughout the novel we see Sethe being ghosted by her grief, guilt, and fear; ghosted by the past in which she is trapped, in a moment when she had to decide for her children. Morrison reveals that ruthless relativity of time from the perspective of a slave mother who sees twenty years of keeping her children as a lifetime because usually they "run off or been hanged, got rented out, loaned out, bought up, brought back, stored up, mortgaged, won, stolen or seized" (23) much earlier. *Beloved* is not just a book about the darkest pages in American history, it is a monument left by the author to future generations, and its main purpose is to fight national amnesia.

So, what is time? Is it our past, our present, or our future? Everything or nothing at all? For centuries, humanity has sought answers, and literature has consistently served as a unique source, complementing other fields of study within the humanities. Today, time seems so precious that we find it a waste of time to read a novel (or just read) because apparently, we have more crucial tasks on our agenda. We have to catch up with reels, shorts, tweets, Black Fridays, or whatever it is that makes us busy and seemingly valuable. The speed of everything seems enormous, consumption is contagious so if it is slow, there is no profit, if there is no profit, there is no interest. During the global pandemic, we were given the opportunity for contemplation, stimulating a period of personal existential reflection that provoked awareness of essential priorities and values. Merry Levov in Philip Roth's *American Pastoral* says, "[l]ife is just a short period of time in which we are alive" (277), and there are two things that I wonder. Firstly, is it the value of existence that we should pay attention to, the time that equals to our life experience? Or should we abandon our narcissistic nature for a moment and underline the invaluable existence of a human being whose presence here is just a short moment in time? I do not have an answer, and I am sure there are many different perspectives, each shaped by its owner's life baggage, but obviously genuine literature provides us with a rich tapestry of human experience and invaluable insights.

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