

Literary Chronotope: An Exploration

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Abstract

M.M. Bakhtin, the Russian scholar, coined the term “chronotope” in order to represent the interrelatedness of “time-space” as contributing factors to the plot of a novel. We explore the various aspects of the significance that chronotopes hold in driving the plot and its understanding. The chronotopes are cognized in the context of the modern novel with the primary text being analysed in the paper. We travel through the different spaces and the polar geography of the plot of Dan Brown’s *Deception Point* under the lens of its temporal specifications, in an attempt to study Literary Chronotopes and their enriching role.

Keywords: Bakhtin; Literary chonotopes; Plot; Space; Time.

In 1937, M.M. Bakhtin, a Russian literary scholar, introduced and developed the term “Chronotope”, in the world of literature. The term can be literally translated as “time-space”. Bakhtin used this term for the first time in his essay entitled “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel”, wherein he explained how various literary genres worked with several different specifications of space and time that, therefore, gives each genre their characteristic narrative.

Bakhtin has defined Chronotope in his essay as the term given to the “intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature. This term is employed in mathematics and was introduced as part of Einstein’s Theory of Relativity. The special meaning it has in relativity theory is not important for our purposes; we are borrowing it for literary criticism almost as a metaphor (almost, but not entirely). What counts for us is the fact that it expresses the inseparability of space and time (time as the fourth dimension of space). We understand the chronotope as a formally constitutive category of literature; we will not deal with the chronotope in other areas of culture. In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. This intersection

of axes and fusion of indicators characterizes the artistic chronotope. The chronotope in literature has an intrinsic generic significance. It can even be said that it is precisely the chronotope that defines genre and generic distinctions, for in literature the primary category in the chronotope is time. The chronotope as a formally constitutive category determines to a significant degree the image of man in literature as well. The image of man is always intrinsically chronotopic." (Bakhtin 84-258)

What Bakhtin claimed in his essay "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel", was the interrelatedness of time and space and how the two can never be studied in isolation. 'The man in literature' is chronotopic in the sense that to understand man, it is important to understand the 'time' - the situations, circumstances, era—one exists in and the 'space' one occupies. The space occupied can refer not only to the physical surrounding but also to the space occupied in terms of his position in the scenarios being discussed.

Bakhtin's followers, Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist have stated that they understand chronotope as an analytical tool, a unit of language that can be studied as per the specifications of time and space, and their significance is symbolized in the philosophy of language. A very important feature of chronotopes is that they can very well represent ideologies and worldviews. Civilizations have been understood with the time of their existence and establishment along with the location and place that they had occupied, which then influences the manner in which they are adapted in the future.

Bakhtin expressed the significance of chronotopes on four distinct levels. The first is the "plot-generating" ability of chronotopes. A writer can build a complex plot on the mere stepping stones of time and space. The knowledge of the times in which a story is to be set and space of the story's existence, is enough for a writer to begin. A very significant example is 'speculative fiction'. The base of the plot of such writing, that emerges from an existing reality, might as well be the 'space' of the story, and with being set into the future, speculative fiction can be easily built on a chronotope.

Second, is their "representational significance". A chronotope automatically presents a picture of specific areas and times being depicted by them. The readers can assume other details on their understanding of the chronotope. Here, Bart Keunen's understanding of such a cognitive approach to chronotopes is applied, as an acquisition of genre memory by readers of an amalgamation of mental edifices tantamount to differing chronotopes of genres. In the process of reading, a mental schemata out of these edifices

is then activated making the reader capable of recognizing the pertinent chronotope and its relevant genre, thus, fulfilling its representational role (Bemong and Borghart 12).

Third, chronotopes can become the base for “distinguishing types of genres”. As discussed earlier as well, chronotopes shape the narratives characteristic of different genres of writing. Owing to this, differentiating genres on the basis of their time and space requirements, is easier with the understanding of chronotopes, “...narratives that in the course of the reading process yield a similar impression as for their fictional world can be assumed to share the same generic chronotope. This implies, in turn, the possibility of categorizing a narrative text on the sole basis of its display of a sufficient number of textual strategies known to be characteristic of a particular generic chronotope” (Bemong and Borghart 10).

And fourth is the “semantic importance” of chronotopes. Semantics is an important aspect of linguistics and chronotopes can be used as tools for achieving an easier understanding of them. Since chronotopes are literally time and space, it is much ratiocinated to understand language because it is the era of its development and the place of its origin that shapes the language.

The primary text being studied for this paper is Dan Brown’s *Deception Point*. *Deception Point* is a political conspiracy, a science fiction thriller, that takes its readers onto a journey of discovery of truth that was portrayed by monopolizing power holders and how different it was from the truth that was the actual reality of the situation. The novel opens with a political competition between the current President of US, Zachary Herney, and Presidential candidate for the next term, Senator Sedgewick Sexton, in the middle of which is caught up Senator Sexton’s daughter, and protagonist of the novel, Rachel Sexton. The dirt being flung at NASA by the Senator for being heavily funded without it yielding successful results is hoped to be curbed by the discovery of a meteorite that bears proof of extraterrestrial life, found buried under three hundred-year-old layer of ice on the Milne Ice Shelf in the Arctic circle. After being deceived by the mirage that was presented to everyone, and the protagonist and two other major characters almost dying, the truth is revealed that the entire plot was a deliberate attempt at the hands of the National Reconnaissance Office Director in order to save NASA’s name. The temporal and spatial specifications play a major role in accomplishing the writer’s vision of creating perfect suspense that is not anticipated by the readers, which, in turn, brings a shock towards the end of the novel.

The novel is seen encompassing a myriad of ‘spaces’ including the Milne

Ice Shelf in the Arctic Circle and the political sphere of the US government. The novel throws its readers on a rollercoaster ride tracing the secret-for-ress known to be the National Reconnaissance Office, the peaks of the Arctic Circle and the Hallways of the powerful West Wing of the White House. Rachel Sexton, the protagonist, works for the National Reconnaissance Office and is called to corroborate the discovery of the NASA team, by the President Zachary Herney along with four other civilian scientists – Michael Tolland, the star oceanographer, Corky Marlinson, the prize-winning astrophysicist, Dr. Wailee Ming, Chairman of paleontology at UCLA, and Dr. Norah Mangor, Glaciologist from the University of New Hampshire-- which “will surely be one of the most stunning insights into [our] universe that science has ever uncovered”.

When understanding and applying this theory of literary chronotopes to the fiction of today’s times, the most significant contribution of chronotope is that it defines the problematic differentiation that is experienced in the modern world in between the past as against the present, the real mirrored in the representational as well as space understood as the place (Smethurst 1-2). The novel brings to the reader this phenomenon, where it is difficult to understand the reality of the discovery made and the interpretation of that reality into something else. The past mistakes of NASA have heavily impacted their present credibility. And this past that makes the present while inciting the dubious actions of NRO Director is highlighted in the chronotopic aspects that have contributed to the plot.

The discovery made by NASA is that of a meteorite embedded under two hundred feet of ice that is almost three hundred years old. The exact locations of the setting drive the novel towards a realistic feel. The location of the Milne ice shelf “above the Eighty-second parallel on the northernmost coast of Ellesmere Island in the high Arctic” which is “four miles wide and reaches thickness of over three hundred feet”, immediately draws a near-reality picture of the space being described. This detail meets the deliverable of representation that the chronotope should anyway exhibit. Rachel Sexton is sent to the “habisphere” set up by the NASA team, where the meteorite was discovered. The description of the habisphere being a “Multistage inflatable plexipolysorbate” looking like “an enclosed big top tent” brings a clearer understanding of the narrative to the reader.

Rachel’s conversation with the President, after she learns the details of the discovery, from the “Portable Secure Comm” brings forth another description of the space being built for the ‘chronotope’. Its perception from the eyes of Rachel like “a basement in winter”, easily presents the maca-

bre cold and dingy atmosphere of the high-tech room meant for classified conversations. Further examples of the space being a contributor to the plot of the novel are found in the apt elucidations of Michael Tolland's ship and the submarine "U.S.S. Charlotte" that ultimately saved Rachel and the other civilian scientists.

The 'time' aspect of the chronotope of this novel lies in the fact that the major portion of the action occurs within a single day in the novel. Moreover, the fact that the ice under which the supposed meteorite was found was three hundred years old, dating the crash of the "rock" back in 1716, gives a new dimension to the understanding of the novel. The nitty-gritty details of the number of days it had been since the team of NASA scientists had set the habisphere on the Milne Ice Shelf, ten days, the time scheduled for the President's press conference, 8 P.M., the time slated for the big reveal to the White House staff, 4 P.M., and other details keep adding to the layers of the plot of the novel. The most riveting facets of the chronotope of this novel are, however, evidenced in the intricate details about particular locations and temporal specifications. Also interesting is the time duration that the novel covers, with Brown being able to pack intense action-driven sequences into the duration of one day which depicts the importance of unity of time in gripping the audience, keeping them on the edge of their seats.

In an attempt to understand the contribution of chronotope in the novel, it is found that the ability to generate plots of chronotope can be easily understood with the context that sets the action of the novel in motion. The novel being set in the Arctic Circle, itself becomes a catalyst for the story. Further, the chronotope has added to the retention of the novel in the minds of the readers with the minute details of the time-space carrying the sequences of the novel. The ability to distinguish genre types is also evident in *Deception Point*, as the thriller has set a very particular characteristic of its temporal requirements and spatial features that are attached to the genre for keeping readers engaged with the novel. And lastly, the semantic significance that the chronotope holds in the novel is depicted in the fact that the language used is in keeping with the thrill, linked with the specifications of the novel.

The chronotope of this thriller is, thus, characteristic of its particular narrative with action filled plots, be it political ploys or combats, compacted under time crunches and remote locations, inaccessible to a common man and apt for research and development stations of the monopolizing governments of the world. Hence, it is an easy yet important conclusion that such chronotopes become especially significant in keeping the reader

engaged, giving a new 'thrill' at every turn of the page.

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