

# A Comparative Study of the Novels of Wallace Stegner and William Gibson

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## Introduction

Narratology is a discipline that studies the governing aspects of stories such as structure, plot, and theme. By the study of narratology, we are able to gain valuable insights useful for both reading and teaching stories.

What we are going to detail in this paper is but a part of our ongoing study of narratology. This paper will compare two different types of novels: Wallace Stegner's *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* (hereafter TBRCM) as an example of a character-driven novel, and William Gibson's *Neuromancer* as an example of a plot-driven novel. We will discuss many of the same points (or aspects) in the two different novels as a comparison. We owe our analytical perspectives on narratology to M. M. Bakhtin especially to his essays in *The Dialogic Imagination*, and we also owe Jeff Gerke for his ideas about *Plot versus Character* in terms of the elements of novels. Bakhtin provided us the paradigm we used to analyze plot-driven novels and character-driven novels in reference to the term *chronotope* (a term which translates as time/space).

## Chapter I

### *The Big Rock Candy Mountain - A Character-driven Literary Novel*

#### *Introduction to the discussion of TBRCM*

The following aspects were chosen for analysis: genres; historical and ahistorical time in the novels; historical events; places where things happen; the desires and fears of the protagonists, allies and enemies; the choices that the protagonists made in the climatic scenes; and what the protagonists gained in the denouements. In the first section of this chapter, I will explain the meaning of the terms and I will analyze TBRCM using these terms in the second section of this chapter.

#### 1. The terms chosen for analysis

Following 1.1 - 1.8 are the points of focus for each aspectual term.

##### 1.1 Genre

First of all, I am going to focus on genre of the novels since the goal of this paper is to clarify the differences between two novels that belong to two different genres by analyzing their *chronotopic* expressions. Bakhtin's book provides abundant examples of the different *chronotopic* expressions found in different genres. For example, the *chronotope* seen in ancient European

folktales belong to the *idyllic chronotope* (Bakhtin 225) while those seen in the epic poems of ancient Greece are part of the *adventure chronotope* (100). Bakhtin also compares the allegories of the Middle Ages with the realistic novels of Rabelais in the Renaissance.

### 1.2 Historical and ahistorical time

Next I'll discuss the term *historical*. Historical means that something is not only realistic but also refers to events at the national level. For example, time is historical in the novels written toward the end of the Middle Ages. The chivalric romances (novels) such as Langland's *Piers Plowman* portray the people from "king to the pauper", that is, people of all the social classes. On the other hand, time in Dante's "Divine Comedy" encompasses eternity. Therefore, time in Dante is ahistorical (156).

### 1.3 Historical events

Historical events have effects at the national level. They are contrasted with individual events that occur to the people in novels.

### 1.4 Places

Places are an important element in the analysis of *chronotopic* expressions. For example, people looked at nature as mere landscape after the collective thinking of the agriculture-oriented era passed. Bakhtin compared the following two concepts: (1) the transition from group-oriented thinking to individual-oriented thinking and (2) the change from folktales to epic poems. In his comparison, space (landscape) and time (epic poems) are perceived as a whole. Bakhtin uses terms such as the *chronotope* of nature, the *chronotope* of family idyll, and the *chronotope* of labor idyll. Places thus can be perceived as inextricably entwined with time

(Bakhtin 250).

In the same way that I explicated the meanings of the terms time and space, I will now illustrate the terms I use for the analyses of the protagonists.

### 1.5 Desires and fears of the protagonists

Protagonists in novels usually hold different sorts of desires, i.e. commonplace desire and peculiar desire. When a protagonist focuses on a particular desire, two types of conflict occur: one that promotes the fulfillment of the desire and the other that tries to prevent that fulfillment. Stories are propelled by the desires of the protagonist, thus these desires are a major element in novels (Gerke 53). The various fears that the protagonist holds are also important elements in the novel.

### 1.6 Allies and enemies

Allies and the enemies are also important concepts. The situation will be very dependent on whether the enemies are inside or outside of the protagonist. Whether or not the protagonist changes after the climactic scene depends on the locations of the enemies. For example, the protagonist internally changes when the enemy is inside and the protagonist wins over the enemy (Gerke 93).

### 1.7 Climax

The climax is the peak of the conflict between the protagonist and the enemies. In the climactic scene, the protagonist has to make a decision. For example, if the enemy is inside of the protagonist, he/she must decide whether to continue a negative habit or change and grow out of it.

### 1.8 Denouement

Denouement is the last part of a story after the conflict is over. The protagonist usually has a new power because he/she won

the conflict. For example, the protagonist who stops having grudge has the power of love.

## **2. Elements of narratives in TBRCM**

Now I will begin with an analysis of the novel TBRCM based on the aspects I have briefly discussed.

### **2.1 Genres**

There are no rigorous rules in categorizing novels into different genres, but one way to distinguish serious novels from genre novels is the nature of the antagonist. In general, if a protagonist finds his or her enemy to be internal then it is a serious novel, while protagonists more often combat external enemies in genre novels. TBRCM is considered to be a literary novel as the conflicts originate from the protagonist's personal desires.

### **2.2 Historical time and ahistorical time**

Things happen in the framework of the historical time in TBRCM. This novel starts at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the protagonist, Bo Mason, was born and ends around the time when he dies in the early 1940s. Bo's ancestors are briefly mentioned in the novel, so that would push the start back to the time of the War Between the States.

### **2.3 Historical events**

TBRCM depicts the Klondike Gold Rush in Alaska in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Then it shows the lives of homesteaders, including the protagonist's family, who moved to Canada under the Homestead Act. The flu epidemic of 1918 plays a key role in the narrative. Finally, the novel depicts the life during Prohibition when the protagonist works as a bootlegger.

### **2.4 Places**

The places in TBRCM are mostly in the Western part of the United States, except when the protagonist moves to Canada. Most of these are all geographically authentic places. The protagonist's relationship with the places is similar to Wild West. He mostly lives far from his neighbors even when they move to Salt Lake City. His dangers involved with his bootlegging business keeps him away from the other neighbors.

### **2.5 Desires and fears of the protagonists**

In TBRCM, the protagonist's desire is to leave his hard life behind and become rich. He is such a masculine type that it is hard to imagine what he fears. However, it is possible to guess that the protagonist's biggest fear is falling back into poverty. Contrary to this desire, he loses everything in this world, and he keeps investing money in failed projects until he loses all his savings in the mines.

### **2.6 Allies and enemies**

The protagonist has wife and children in TBRCM. His family members are obedient allies for him. On the other hand, he has lots of enemies. These enemies make the story progress. His earliest enemy was a brutal father. As he grew to an adult, his enemies became more diverse, from the harsh weather to hijackers who try to rob his bootleg whisky. Besides these outer enemies, the protagonist also has inner enemies, such as sinful defects as his unquenchable desire for wealth.

### **2.7 Choices in the climax scenes**

TBRCM is a very long story that progresses slowly until the climactic event. In fact the protagonist kills himself in the climax, even though he had other alternatives. Obviously he was desperate when he

committed suicide, but nobody forced him to die. The biggest choice the protagonist made was to choose death. Why did he choose to die? The answer to this question is not the theme of this paper, so that will be saved until another article.

### 2.8 Gained treasure in the denouements

In general, characters gain something important after the climax because the climax is the protagonist's last battle against his/her enemies. In TBRCM the protagonist literally gains rest in peace. His quest for prosperity is over and he gains his eternal peace.

### 2.9 Conclusion in the discussion of TBRCM

TBRCM is a novel that describes the life of an individual in the context of 19<sup>th</sup> & 20<sup>th</sup> century American history. It would have been written differently if Stegner had chosen to set his narrative in an East Coast city, instead he chose to set it in the west where nature is harsh and changes in history are clear. Thus, we are able to observe the *chronotope* of the road, field, saloons, hotels, and cars in the novel. Through the descriptions of the individuals and the historical events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, TBRCM illustrates the transitional *chronotope* from the agrarian culture/economy to the industrial culture/economy.

## Chapter II

### *Neuromancer* - A Plot-driven Genre Novel

#### Introduction to the discussion of *Neuromancer*

The concept of *chronotope* is an especially compelling tool to analyze genre fiction, and William Gibson's 1984 award-winning Science Fiction novel *Neuromancer* lends itself well to just such an analysis. First, it

needs to be pointed out that there should be no confusion with the advanced mathematical theories of the Space-Time Continuum. On that topic the best authority is M.M. Bakhtin:

We will give the name *chronotope* (literally, "time space") to the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature. This term [space-time] 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*. (Bakhtin 84)

For this section of our paper I will analyze *Neuromancer* using five fractal *chronotopic* levels. In the book *Bakhtin's Theory of the Literary Chronotope: Reflections, Applications, Perspectives*, the authors describe five levels of analysis that are

multidimensional, in that they are all simultaneously present in the text. Thus I shall attempt a feat of analytic acrobatics metaphorically akin to doing backflips on a trampoline whilst juggling bowling balls, chainsaws and flaming raccoons. The five levels are *micro-chronotopes*, *minor chronotopes*, *major chronotopes*, *generic chronotopes*, and *teleological chronotopes*. William Gibson's 1984 novel, *Neuromancer*, was no ordinary example of the genre of Science Fiction. Instead, it inspired an entirely new sub-genre within Science Fiction - Cyberpunk. Thus the focus of this analysis will be on the genre and plot-driven aspects of *Neuromancer's* five chronotopic levels.

### Micro-chronotopes

The genre of Science Fiction more than any other, excepting poetry, depends on words and phrases to facilitate world-building. Nele Bemong and Pieter Borghart write:

On the first level, we situate "micro-chronotopes". Language is charged with chronotopic energy, and the vitality of language grows, in part, out of the tension between the 'centrifugal' chronotopic implications of individual words and phrases, and the 'centripetal' forces [such as syntax] that subordinate these centrifugal energies to coherent overarching meanings. Micro-chronotopes are generated out of units of language smaller than the sentence through the harnessing of these energies in literary texts. (Bemong. *et al.* 6)

Though *micro-chronotopes* refer to language smaller than a sentence, it still might be best to start with *Neuromancer's* opening sentence, one so fraught with power and substance that it is regularly quoted as being among the most impressive opening

lines in literature, ranked with Melville's "Call me Ishmael" and Pynchon's "A screaming came across the sky." *Neuromancer* begins thusly: "The sky above the port was the color of television, tuned to a dead channel." (Gibson 1)

A good example of the micro-chronotope of *Neuromancer* is the "centripetal" phrase *the color of television, tuned to a dead channel*. The first thing to note is the lack of article, i.e. not "the color of A television". The lack of article makes the generic phrase seem more universal to that time and space, and the "tuned to a dead channel" implies the dynamic, hiss and crackle and the Brownian motion of gray static. The feeling this opening line generates is one of old, out-of-date technology, and a gray, dystopian landscape.

The genre of SF is well known for generating new vocabulary, most often mere technobabble-gibberish, but one coinage in this novel that stands out from all the rest, and that's the "centrifugal" term *Cyberspace*. Though written long before the media-intensive World Wide Web, this word has entered the English language as a synonym for digital world as a whole.

Gibson defines it thus:

A consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation, by children being taught mathematical concepts. ... A graphic representation of data abstracted from banks of every computer in the human system. Unthinkable complexity. Lines of light ranged in the nonspace of the mind, clusters and constellations of data. Like city lights, receding. (Gibson 69)

Along with *Cyberspace*, Gibson's novel was the first to apply the mathematical term *Matrix*, as a synonym for *Cyberspace*:

"A year here and he still dreamed of cyberspace, hope fading nightly. All the speed he took, all the turns he'd taken and the corners he'd cut in Night City, and still he'd see the matrix in his sleep, bright lattices of logic unfolding across the colorless void" (Gibson 4)

"He'd operated on an almost permanent adrenaline high, a byproduct of youth and proficiency, jacked into a custom cyberspace deck that projected his disembodied consciousness into the consensual hallucination that was the matrix." (Gibson 5)

I will cite more examples of how the micro-chronotope colors the novel when I use the names and occupations of the main characters to relate details of the plot in the section labeled: Major Chronotopes.

### Minor chronotopes

The *minor chronotopes* are the motifs of set and setting, the space and time, as it were, of the individual scenes. Bakhtin described it thusly:

"We have been speaking so far only of the *major* chronotopes, those that are most fundamental and wide-ranging. But each such chronotope can include within it an unlimited number of *minor* chronotopes; in fact [...] any motif may have a specific chronotope of its own. Within the limits of a single work and within the total literary output of a single author we may notice a number of different chronotopes and complex interactions among them, specific to the given work or author; it is common moreover for one of these chronotopes to envelope or dominate the others" (Bakhtin 252)

Nele Bemong and Pieter Borghart go on to

say:

"Bakhtin on occasion uses the terms *chronotope* and *motif* as synonyms, for example when he uses the phrase "chronotope of meeting" interchangeably with "motif of meeting". Other motivic chronotopes that Bakhtin mentions, apart from the meeting, are the chronotope of the road, the castle, the salon, the provincial town, the threshold and the public square. These "building blocks" of narrative texts are defined as "four-dimensional mental images, combining the three spatial dimensions with the time structure of temporal action", "congealed events", "condensed reminders of the kind of time and space that typically functions there" (Bemong. *et al.* 7)

The minor chronotopes of *Neuromancer* jump back and forth between historical and ahistorical time. It starts in a rundown bar in Night City, a dystopian slum in Chiba City, Japan, across the bay from Tokyo, and from there jumps all across the world, from the megacity that covers the eastern coast of the USA, called *The Sprawl*, to Istanbul, to Freeside, an orbiting space habitat. All the while the protagonist, Case, travels the ahistorical matrix realm of cyberspace, a chronotope unhinged from traditional notions of time and space.

### Major chronotope

The simplest explanation of the concept major chronotope would be to call them sub-genres, or the unity of the competing minor chronotopes into a synergistic whole greater than the sum of its parts.

The interaction between the concrete chronotopic units of a narrative eventually leaves the reader with an

overarching impression, which we call *major* or *dominant chronotopes*. This central, "transsubjective" chronotope thus serves as a unifying ground for the competing local chronotopes in one and the same narrative text. Many Bakhtin scholars do not posit an intermediary level between minor (motivic) and generic chronotopes and simply equate the level of the dominant chronotope with that of the latter. However, not every dominant chronotope will generate a particular literary genre; there are dominant chronotopes that have not - yet - become generics. (Bemong. *et al.* 7)

In the case of *Neuromancer* we can perceive an amalgam of two sub-genres, the "Heist" from Crime Fiction, and Cyberpunk Science Fiction. The generic plot of heist fiction involves gathering a group of specialists in order to commit a specific crime. The works of Elmore Leonard and Richard Stark (Donald E. Westlake) provide many good examples. In *Neuromancer* the first part of the story revolves around the ex-Special Forces Soldier/Mercenary, Armitage, recruiting the Street Samurai/Razorgirl, Molly Millions - she of the iconic mirrorshades implanted over her eyes, and 10cm razors than can be extended from under her fingernails - who in turn recruits the burned-out Console Cowboy, Henry Dorset Case. They then steal the digital version of Case's late mentor, Dixie Flatline, to assist him in cyberspace, and, in Istanbul, they pressure the mental illusionist, Rivera, into helping them break into the labyrinthine mansion called Villa Straylight on the space habitat called Freeside in order to access a special computer terminal.

The second part of the novel details the cyberpunk-heist itself. They are unknowingly in the employ of a sentient AI

computer named Wintermute, who wants to defy the Turing Police and join with its other half, another AI computer called Neuromancer, to become a Superintelligence. Note how the micro-chronotope involved in naming the futuristic occupations and technology raises the level of this Cyberpunk classic to the realm of lyric poetry.

### **Generic chronotope**

At this level, the chronotope finally reaches a scale that coincides with traditional aspects of genre analysis - classic, mystery, thriller, SF, romance, Western, fantasy, horror, etc.

"Conversely, narratives that in the course of the reading process yield a similar impression with regard to their fictional world can be assumed to share a similar major chronotope; major chronotopes can thus be divided into classes of still more abstract *generic chronotopes*. These chronotopes are referred to as "chronotopes that [...] can be abstracted from the individual works in which they appear and serve as the basis for categorization and comparison for those works" On this particular level, the concept should be understood as what Bakhtin calls "a formally constitutive category of literature" (Bemong. *et al.* 7)

Despite the heist plot borrowed from Crime Fiction, the novel *Neuromancer* is set firmly in the major literary genre of Science Fiction, sub-genres "dystopian" and "cyberpunk" notwithstanding.

### **Teleological chronotope**

The teleology of this article is to show how Bakhtin's chronotopic theory of literary

criticism concisely illustrates how the Plot-Driven vs Character-Driven spectrum is the ultimate level of teleological analysis. This is how the *teleological chronotope* is described:

"...a systematic framework that makes it possible to divide generic chronotopes into even more abstract classes. Central to his framework is the division into two different types of "plotspace-chronotopes", which illustrate two different kinds of temporal development in the abstract totality of the fictional world. *Teleological* - or *monological* - *chronotopes* characterize traditional narratives in which the entire plot moves towards the final moment (the "Eschaton"). Here, the curve of suspense is constructed as an alternation between chronotopes of equilibrium and conflict. Conflicts in these narratives are simply external obstacles in the course of the hero's journey to a state of equilibrium. Based on the position of the conflict within the narrative, Bakhtin distinguishes three sub-types: the *mission chronotope* (where the conflict is bracketed by two states of equilibrium; e.g. the adventure novel, the fairy tale, fantasy), the *regeneration chronotope* (where a series of conflicts is overcome in a final equilibrium; e.g. the picaresque novel, the gothic novel, the popular romance) and the *degradation chronotope* (where the initial equilibrium becomes lost in an unresolved conflict; e.g. the tragedies by Sophocles or Shakespeare). In *dialogical chronotopes*, on the other hand, the narrative is not directed towards a final moment, to a "telos", but rather consists of a network of conflicting situations and junctions that communicate with each other - hence the term "dialogical". Here, the conflict

chronotopes are predominantly psychological in nature, and what matters is not the telos that more traditional narratives are working towards, but the "Kairos": the critical, decisive moments characteristic of modern novels since the nineteenth century. Again, Bakhtin discerns three subtypes of dialogical chronotopes, to wit the *tragic chronotope* (where conflict characters dominate), the *comic chronotope* (where balanced characters dominate) and the *tragicomic chronotope* (no dominating characters)." (Bemong. *et al.* 7-8)

That, of course, brings us, Ouraboros-like, full circle to the unitary realization that the character-driven novel, Wallace Stegner's *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* is an example of the *dialogical chronotope*, and William Gibson's *Neuromancer* is an example of the *mission chronotope*. Both novels can now be perceived as mere points on a much greater spectrum encompassing all examples of literature that the human race has ever created.

## Conclusion

This paper used M.M. Bakhtin's theory of the literary artistic *chronotope* to analyze two seemingly disparate novels, Wallace Stegner's *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*, and William Gibson's *Neuromancer*. First, Stegner's novel was discussed in the context of narratology as a character-driven novel. Then Gibson's novel was analyzed according to Bakhtin's five levels of *chronotope* as a plot-driven novel. Finally, it was shown that, at the highest level of analysis, both novels exist within the field of the *teleological chronotope*, which essentially states that all literature can be classified somewhere within the Space-Time Continuum, as part of the Plot-Driven vs. Character-Driven continuum.



This realization can be utilized by educators as a tool for teaching students reading - both intensive and extensive, and creative writing. We plan to explore this topic in greater depth during the years to come. Hopefully you will recognize the genre references that follow:

Don't touch that dial!

Stay tuned for our next exciting episode...

...to be continued!

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