

A Chronotopic Study of the Novels of Wallace Stegner and Chester Himes

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Introduction

Chronotope (the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships in language) is an obscure term from literary criticism coined by the Semiotician M. M. Bakhtin in his 1937 essay "Формы времени и хронотопа в романе", or "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel." But the English speaking world didn't become aware of it until 1981 when it was translated and published in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M.M.* In this paper we will discuss two different 20th century novels using the concept of chronotope: *The Spectator Bird* (henceforth TSB) (1974) and *Cotton Comes to Harlem* (henceforth CCH) (1965).

Chapter 1 TSB: a character-driven novel

Summary of *The Spectator Bird*

TSB is a sequel to *All the Little Live Things* (1967). It was revealed in *ALLT* that Joe and Ruth Allston's son, Curt, died young, so they make a trip to Denmark to alleviate their grief. Half of the novel is about their lives in California in 1974 and another half of the book is a flashback, in diary format, to their 1954 trip to Denmark. In Denmark Joe and Ruth found lodging at the apartment of a countess. When they visited a

castle owned by the countess's brother they discovered the secret reason why Joe's mother had emigrated to the United States.

Unlike the plot-driven story of CCH nothing dynamic happens in TSB. The narrator's only action is reading his diary while gunfights and car chases are routine in CCH. The only dynamic action that the protagonist takes in TSB is walking with the countess and kissing her once.

The Minor Chronotope of *The Spectator Bird*

The Minor chronotope refers to the motif of a novel. Various different motifs combine to form the theme of a novel. Our memories are usually connected to the times and places in which they occurred, and these are transformed into crucial aspects of the person who recalls the incident.

Chronotope of places

The chronotope of places in this novel deals almost entirely with various residences: an American home, a Danish apartment, a Danish castle, and a Danish cottage. The novel also includes other places, such as a deck of a ship and idyllic farms and fields.

These places suggest the physical and spiritual environment of the people who live there. Joe and Ruth live in a typical American house. The different visitors who

come to their home show a clear contrast. For example, Ben Alexander, a wealthy medical doctor, owns a large house and 600 acres of land. He likes to give parties every weekend even though he is already in his eighties. Joe, on the other hand, is a retired literary agent in his seventies who treasures old notebooks from the time when he used to represent novelists. Joe is a conservative who dislikes the culture of the sixties and seventies. There's another character that creates a clear contrast with Joe and Ruth: Cesare, an Italian avant-garde writer who urges Joe and Ruth to come to live in the city and have more fun.

The other locations are mostly in Denmark. The one exception is the deck of the cruise ship carrying them to Europe. The apartment, castle, and cottages in Denmark each represent the type of people who occupy them. More details will be presented in our discussion of the gothic romance chronotope.

Chronotope of history

The Chronotope of history reflects the personal histories of the characters. The countess's husband, Erik, was a quisling, a traitor against Denmark under the Nazi occupation. Thus WWII casts its long shadow over the countess. The fictional countess's cousin is a real historical figure, Karen Blixen, who, as Isak Dinesen, wrote *Out of Africa*. In 1985 the book was made into a successful film starring Meryl Streep and Robert Redford. When the countess listens to the radio, she hears the news "most of which these days is about Senator McCarthy." (79) And Vietnam war-era America is described as follows:

This is 1974, the age of infidelity, when casual coupling and wife swapping and therapeutic prostitution are accepted forms of violence as normal as mugging

and murder, when practices that in my youth would have outraged two-dollar whore are apparently standard in every middle-class bedroom and are explicated, with diagrams, in manuals sold in college bookstores, and celebrated, with whinnies and slobberings, in every novel you pick up. (195)

Major Chronotope

The Major chronotope refers to the subgenre of fiction. We can see both the chronotope of realistic fiction and gothic romance in this novel.

Realistic fiction

Stegner had Joe refer to himself as Babbitt. Joe's life resembles Babbitt's, the protagonist of a novel of the same name written in 1922 by Sinclair Lewis. "The man who in all his life never did one thing he really wanted to." (209) As realistic fiction, TSB explores the twin themes of identity and infidelity.

The first thematic element I will discuss is Joe's identity. Since Joe lost his son, he now has no heirs. He also lost his mother, who immigrated to the US from Denmark when she was sixteen. Joe wants to learn about her home country, especially where she was born. He discovers that his mother was living with a family named Sverdrops until something suddenly caused her to move from Denmark to the United States. Joe wants to learn about his mother's life because it is a matter of his identity as the son of an immigrant from Denmark.

The second thematic element is infidelity. Even though this element is mentioned tongue in cheek, it isn't too much to say that this novel is centered on the issue of infidelity. Stegner writes that Joe disliked being controlled by Ruth.

"All right," she said, appeased. "You'd better not even go down to your study. Take a Jacuzzi and wrap up warm and stay in bed all day."

"Yes, Ma."

She doesn't like that response, which smacks of irony and insubordination. (160)

Joe is not the sort of person who thinks about divorce, but he is dissatisfied. He secretly falls in love with the countess, and he does not know what will happen if he pursue his desire. He simply wants the poor countess to divorce her husband and come to the United States. In one of the more dramatic scenes, the countess tells him that she can't go with them because it would surely ruin Joe and Ruth's marriage. After that Joe realizes that he was wrong and crawls back to Ruth.

Gothic fiction

Early in the novel, Stegner mentions the author Henry James:

I didn't find what I went looking for in Denmark, but I found there was something rotten in that state, as elsewhere, and that the Danes like the rest of the world are attracted to evil, are involved in it, even feel dutiful toward it. If the ghost of Henry James came demanding copy, I could tell him a tale of New World innocence and Old World experience at least as instructive as *Daisy Miller*." (24)

As in Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw*, some parts of TSB are written in the form of a diary and this method of storytelling is common in the Gothic fiction genre. Even though the setting of the Gothic portion of the novel is 1954, well before the advent of

animal cloning, Stegner had both the old and new count conducting crazy biological experiments on their peasants. The first cloned animal was a sheep named Dolly, who lived from 1996 to 2003. The biological experiments are described in Book Four, Chapter Two and in Book Five, Chapter Two.

Minor Chronotope and Major

Chronotope of TSB

The minor chronotope - houses - neatly nests within the major chronotopes of realistic and gothic fiction in TSB. The major chronotope, by definition, is the synergistic totality of the novel's minor chronotopes. The countess lives in a small apartment in Copenhagen, and the reader wonders why she lives in such a small apartment. The fact is that the countess has a back-story of disgrace. Joe also discovers the secret truth about his own mother's history when he visits the Castle and the large farms and fields that are owned by the countess's bother. That secret is related to the diabolical experiments conducted by the old count, the countess' father. The poor lives of the peasants are symbolically represented by their poor cottages, while the prosperous lives of the aristocrats are symbolically represented by the castle.

Conclusion of the discussion of TSB

Wallace Stegner compared American society in the 1970s to the society of Denmark in the 1950s by using different levels of chronotope. Against the background of ever changing ethics and uncertainty in the society, the novel shows the story of a man who could overcome his own internal conflicts in the end. This type of inner struggle against a moral weakness is the archetypal pattern of character-driven novels. The premise of this novel questions whether the ethical nature of a human being can win out over the

animal nature. In this sense, TSB essentially shares the same values with CCH. The point of this paper, therefore, has been to contrast the different levels of chronotopic components in TSB and, as a part of that process, to demonstrate how the central themes of identity and infidelity are displayed in this character-driven novel. Through his protagonist-narrator Joe Allston, Stegner gives us faith that we all have the potential to transform ourselves and rise above our animal existences.

Chapter 2 - CCH: a plot-driven novel

The Chronotope of *Cotton Comes to Harlem*

It is best to begin with a reiteration of Bakhtin's own definition of the literary artistic chronotope:

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. The intersection of axes and fusion of indicators characterizes the artistic chronotope. (84)

Chester Himes (1909 - 1984) was one of the first African-American writers of Hard-Boiled crime fiction. In 1928 he was arrested for armed robbery and spent the next eight years in jail, only being released in 1936. He sold his first short story in 1931, while he was still in jail. He wrote literary novels during the 1930s and 1940s, then moved to France in the 1950s.

In 1957 a French publisher asked him to write a detective novel set in Harlem. Since he was short of money at the time he readily

agreed and thus was born the Harlem Detective series, the first hard-boiled detective series to feature his black protagonists Gravedigger Jones and Coffin Ed Johnson. He wrote nine novels in the series, of which *Cotton Comes to Harlem* was probably the best and most famous.

This chapter will analyze CCH according to the same fractal chronotope schema employed in our last paper.

Level #1: Micro-chronotopes

Micro-chronotopes are generated out of units of language through the harnessing of chronotopic energies in literary texts. The names of the two New York Police Detective protagonists are weighted with significance: "Grave Digger " Jones and "Coffin Ed" Johnson. From the first the names carry the imagery of the cemetery and the implied idea that they will not hesitate to employ violence in pursuit of criminals. Next the actual language evokes the mean streets of Harlem. The following example of the novels dialogue is typical:

All I wish is that I was God for just one mother-raping second," Grave Digger said, his voice cotton-dry with rage. "I know," Coffin Ed said. "You'd concrete the face of the mother-raping earth and turn white folks into hogs. (35)

The next example of the Minor Chronotope can be seen in Himes' colorful description of the streets of 1950s Harlem:

Everything happens in Harlem six days a week, but Sunday morning, people worship God...The bars are closed. The streets are deserted save for the families on their way to church. A drunk better not be caught molesting them; he'll get the black beat off him. (47)

Level #2: Minor Chronotopes - Motifs...

Part 1

Minor chronotopes usually take place at the level of the individual scenes and can refer to the commonalities that unify such disparate settings. CCH has two motifs, the music that defines the era and the physical ghetto as it was in the 1950s. The sum total of the history of the African-American experience is reflected in the motifs of the novel.

Jazz Music in Harlem - CCH can most authentically be read to a Jazz soundtrack. Jazz acts as a symbol for life in the black ghetto of 1950s America. It fixes the novel in a very specific era - the time and space of jazz - and the rhythms of the novel echo rhythms usually associated with jazz, the pacing and layering of the plot-driven narrative follows multiple twisting strands. The theft of \$87,000 in 'Back-to-Africa' money; the wandering cotton bale; the escape of Deke's girl friend, and the schemes of the Southern Colonel to entice Black workers back to the plantation all twist and gyre like competing instruments in a jazz masterpiece, as the clues are pursued, day and night, through the mean streets of Harlem by Coffin Ed and Grave Digger.

The horns were talking and the saxes talking back.

"Listen to that," Grave Digger said when the horns took eight on a frenetic solo.

"Talking under their clothes, ain't it?"

Then the two saxes started swapping fours with the rhythm always in the back. "Somewhere in that jungle is the solution to the world," Coffin Ed said.

"If we could only find it."

"Yeah its like the sidewalks trying to speak in a language never heard. But they can't spell it either."

"Nah," Coffin Ed said. "Unless there's an alphabet for emotion."

"The emotion that comes out of experience. If we could read that language, man, we would solve all the crimes in the world."

"Let's split," Coffin Ed said. "Jazz talks too much to me."

"It ain't so much what it says," Grave Digger agreed. "It's what you can't do about it. (Himes, 33)

Level #2: Minor Chronotopes - Motifs...

Part 2

The second motif is the city of Harlem itself. Not just the physicality of the area, but the psychic and emotional palpability it provides as the background against which the plot unfolds. As I shall later show, the life blacks live in the Harlem ghetto provided the motivation for the protagonists to restore the lost money. This is intrinsically different from the norms for hard-boiled detective fiction, and it is this part of the motif that lifts this story beyond the pulp confines of the genre and into the realm of great literature.

Blank-eyed whores stood on the street corners swapping obscenities with twitching junkies. Muggers and thieves slouched in dark doorways waiting for someone to rob; but there wasn't anyone but each other. Children ran down the street, the dirty street littered with rotting vegetables, uncollected garbage, battered garbage cans, broken glass, dog offal - always running, ducking, dodging. God help them if they got caught. Listless mothers stood in the dark entrances of tenements and swapped talk about their men, their jobs, their poverty, their hunger, their debts, their Gods, their religions, their preachers, their children, their aches and their pains, their bad luck with the numbers and the evilness of white people.

(Himes, 34-35)

Level #3: Major Chronotopes - Black vs White Detective Stories

Black hard-boiled detective stories are such a rarity that they don't even qualify as a sub-genre, let alone a complete genre unto itself. So, for this level I shall illuminate the difference between Hime's black detectives and some of the most famous white detectives. His stories weren't simply a rehash of the hard-boiled tropes, with the faces painted black. They were something completely different. Nele Bemong and Pieter Borghart describe this level thusly:

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. (7)

In the classic British drawing room detective story of Agatha Christie, for instance, the evil the detective seeks to expose springs from the minds of diseased individuals. In the Chandlerian world evil resides within society and the detective is caught in a web of intrigue and deceit, and in Hammett's world of Sam Spade, the plot hinges not so much on who killed who, but on the fact that Sam

Spade is compelled by his abstract moral principles not to let someone murder his partner and escape retribution. Even though he love's Bridget O'Shaughnessy, she killed his partner and he won't "play the sap", take the fall for her crime, and let her escape. But the motivation that drives Gravedigger and Coffin Ed is different. They are rooted in the black culture of Harlem and they are there to defend the weak from predations. That's why Rabinowitz describes it thus:

In *Cotton Comes to Harlem* Deke O'Malley has swindled \$87,000, but before he can take the money and run, it is highjacked. And through all the Chandlerian twists in the plot, the detectives' fundamental aim remains clear. It is not some abstract search for truth or some acting out of abstract principle. As Coffin Ed puts it, "Eighty-seven grand of colored people's hard-earned money got lost in the caper, and we want to get it back." (22-23)

Level #4: Generic Chronotopes - Hard-Boiled Detective Novels and Blaxploitation Movies

With one emergent step we come to the point where the Hard-Boiled detective genre collides with the film genre known as Blaxplotation. The film critic James Monaco described Blaxploitation thusly:

The birth of the Black film of the late sixties and early seventies - with Blacks, by Blacks, and for Blacks; written, directed, and acted by Blacks - was the major success of the Hollywood Renaissance of 1968-1970. (187)

Where these two Generic Chronotopes meet is key to understanding Chester Himes' novel CCH.

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*. On this particular level, the concept should be understood as what Bakhtin calls "a formally constitutive category of literature" (7)

Thus it was only fitting that CCH became the basis for one of the earliest and most important Blaxploitation films. Eithne Quinn and Peter Krämer, wrote in "Blaxploitation"; Chapter Eight of the book *Contemporary American Cinema*:

However, three fairly diverse, black-directed films launched the black action movie cycle. First came *Cotton Comes to Harlem* (1970, United Artists), Ossie Davis' adaptation of black crime writer Chester Himes' novel about two tough black detectives, which became the first black-directed film produced by a major studio to turn a significant profit. The film first presented many of blaxploitation's recurring themes: the colourful ghetto setting; the unabashed black styles, sensibilities, and humor; the proud and effective detectives mediating between black and white worlds; the charismatic black hustler; the, by turns, vindictive, corrupt, and comic white characters; and the pointed social commentary. (185)

Thus, without Chester Himes' pioneering novels, Walter Mosley, author of the 'Easy' Rawlins detective series, would never have been elected Grandmaster by the Mystery Writers of America in 2016; and without the

Blaxploitation films of the 1970s Samuel L. Jackson, Denzel Washington, and Will Smith would never have become the Black superstars that they are today.

Level #5: Teleological - Dialogical

Chronotopes: A Conclusion

Level #5 brings us full circle to the point where the plot-driven novels of Chester Himes occupy one end of a continuum, and the character-driven novels of Wallace Stegner occupy the other. Again it is time to quote Nele Bemong and Pieter Borghart:

...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 chronotopes* characterize traditional narratives in which the entire plot moves towards the final moment. 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. 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. (7-8)

Conclusion

This paper used M.M. Bakhtin's theory of the literary artistic Chronotope to analyze two seemingly disparate novels, Wallace Stegner's *TSB*, and Chester Himes' *CCH*. First, Stegner's novel was discussed as a character-driven novel. Then Himes' 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 as part of the Plot-Driven vs. Character-Driven continuum. This realization can then be utilized by educators as a tool for teaching students reading - both intensive and extensive, and creative writing. This deeper understanding of the fundamental structure of fiction can increase a student's motivation and his or her ultimate enjoyment.

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