

MAPPING THE RHYTHM AND LABYRINTHS OF TIME: A STUDY ON SELECT SHORT FICTION OF JORGE LUIS BORGES

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Abstract

Time is a familiar, but complex concept, which became interesting through its literary representation, shocking and amusing elements. The Paper titled “Mapping the Rhythm and Labyrinths of Time: A Study on Select Short Fiction of Jorge Luis Borges” is an analysis of the temporal elements in “The Secret Miracle,” and “The South.” The present study deals with how the protagonists experience time during the adverse situations in their lives and how they create their own versions of reality.

The first section, “Time versus Time: The Nature and Significance of Time with Focus on the Theory of Henri Bergson” deals with the notion of time developed by the French Philosopher. Bergson emphasises how the qualitative experience of time is different from the scientific notion, which is quantitative. He introduced the concept of pure duration and the distinction between clock time and time system in mind, deviating from the linear narrative of past, present and future.

The second section, “Traversing through the Temporal World of Borges: A Study on Selected Short Fiction” is a deep analysis of the way time is dealt within these stories. Jorge Luis Borges was interested in the representation of the complex nature of dream and reality, along with the nature of time. Hladik in “The Secret Miracle” enjoys a miraculous nature of time, during the moments before his death. In “The South,” Dahlmann's journey to ‘South’ is an escape from reality, which is hellish for him. It also deals with the pressure one experiences due to the limited time and the efforts to escape from the harsh reality. Thus the nature of time, which is complicated like a labyrinth and its rhythm, which is interesting, is also analysed.

Keywords : Time, Pure Duration, Clock Time, Subjective, Qualitative

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Introduction

“What is time?” This is a profound question that has been asked by serious thinkers from Greeks to the modern sciences. Philosophers and theologians offered dynamic views about time. Time is a vital element as far as philosophical, religious, and scientific areas are concerned. Fascinating ideas were developed on the enigmatic nature of time. Various interpretations were given to the concept of time, which seems to be familiar and simple, but which is abstruse and has a deeper level of meaning. “All humans tend to apprehend time through its discrete measurements: days, weeks, years as well as the way it is imposed on us - by the regularity of work schedules, railway time tables, licensing hours” (Cobley 16). Time thus became a familiar concept and daily life is completely based on it.

“In the common-sense conception of time, we assume that there is only one time series, it does not speed up or slow down. Moreover the relations of simultaneity between any two events are the same for everybody” (Oaklander and Smith 163). The issue of whether time itself is subjective, a mind-dependent phenomenon became popular during the later period and was applied in literary works.

The French philosopher Henri Bergson (1859-1948) in his work *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness* (1889) introduced the concept of time system in the mind, which is subjective. His main argument is that the clock time of technology is entirely different from the psychological time human beings experience. He emphasises the qualitative nature of time. He thus distinguishes between the chronological order and the time system in the mind. “The normal, received understanding of time, for example, as used in natural sciences, is, according to Bergson, based on spatialisation of time, to which Bergson contrasted as pure succession” (Vedeler 186).

One of the most recognised and honoured literary figures of the twentieth century; Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986) had a great influence on Latin American literature and is considered as the most influential author in the Spanish language. He was a writer of short stories and fictional essays who also gained international fame as poet, critic, and translator.

Borges is a world of complex and paradoxical perceptions and dimensions. He can be seen as an author of purely archetypal literary texts; as a bookish and almost unreal individual; as a harbinger of major trends in structuralist, poststructuralist and postmodern thought; as a cosmopolitan, universal writer; as an essentially Argentine author deeply concerned with both his country's literary classics and its history. (Boldy 3)

Time versus Time: The Nature and Significance of Time with Focus on the Theory of Henri Bergson

The French Philosopher and one of the most influential thinkers of the twentieth century, Henri Bergson became the most celebrated philosopher of his time and his fame and reputation extended beyond French “His position in the history of modernism is indeed unique. His philosophical ideas can be seen as part of the modernism's reaction to the tyranny of the clock” (Joseph 86).

It was through his ideas about time that he first made his mark on the nineteenth century, a response to the new idea that science alone could truly predict human emotions, ideas, and thoughts. Key among the ideas of Bergson is the distinction between the mechanised clock time and the way time is actually experienced. Bergson published his doctoral thesis as his first book *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness* first published in 1889. It traces the concept of time and introduces the theory of duration.

It was a time when science was considered as an answer to everything. The general tendency was to privilege science:

Bergson considers clock time as a useful simplification. It is useful because it helps to control, regulate, and organise social life. It has a practical function, dividing time into individual units or distinct segments. The quantitative approach to time is to measure it through numbers. Bergson but captures the experience of psychological time, which has a qualitative progression involving the interpenetration of past and present. Clock time has no durational experience which shows that the past continues to progress into the present. It is completely based on quantitative units. He distinguishes between the qualitative experiences of duration and quantitative duration, which is countable. (“Bergson and Time” 00:04:07-00:04:48).

Pure duration is qualitative. It is considered real duration. The real duration can only be experienced by intuition, it cannot be analysed mathematically. To comprehend the nature of time, it is divided into definite moments or intervals. Time is thus considered as an ordered arrangement of events rather than the flow of experience. Pure duration is continuous and indivisible. Mathematical time is divisible into units such as seconds, minutes, days, and so on, which is not related to the flow of real-time. “Bergson does not accept the true duration to be a quantity. It has a qualitative size, which has an intense character. It becomes possible to experience true duration when one becomes entirely entranced by something, when hearing a melody or when one leaves the area of experience of space, for example, in a dream” (Birx 83).

Duration facilitates the connection between present and past. Duration has two aspects. There is a duration properly understood, and there is memory. Duration is the logical relation that necessarily functions between the actual present and all the levels of the virtual pasts. “Memory allows us to access the past individually; and

for us, memory is essentially coextensive with duration. Memory plays a role in keeping the present in contact with the pasts in all their divergent manifestations” (Clarke 172).

Clock time is quantitative and independent of the self. It depends on accurate measurement and is objective to the degree that it is shared with others and verifiable. Subjective time is the inner, subjective experience of time. It is all about the deepest psychic states, which are fully interpenetrating, and in no sense separate, express the temporal experience of subjective time. These deepest psychic states exist in duration, and duration is another name for genuine temporality. Subjective time is the process in which each succeeding psychic state evolves organically from the preceding psychic state, and in a sense contains the preceding psychic state. Objective time, on the other hand, belongs to surface states of the psyche, in which objects, or psychic states, are set out in order, separated, one after another.

Traversing through the Temporal World of Borges: A Study on Selected Short Fiction

“The Secret Miracle” is a fantastic journey through the miraculous nature of time experienced by the protagonist Jaromir Hladik, who is a Jewish writer. The story begins in an objective, “real-time” rooted in history, during the Second World War. The setting is clearly defined as Prague, March 14, 1939. The historical time supports objective time in the story. The story begins with the dream of Hladik and the plot turns to a dream. In the dream, Hladik is part of a long chess match between two illustrious families.

Starting a story with a dream puts the readers in an alternate reality mode. The dream, in particular, sounds super ominous as “it had been started many centuries in the past” (Borges, “The Secret Miracle” 124). Five days later, on March 19, 1939, Hladik was arrested because of his Jewish blood as well as the Jewish subjects in his works. Julius Rothe, the Nazi official decides Hladik's execution to be on March 29 at 9 a.m. Here, the narrator points out the Nazi administration's desire to work deliberately. Hladik has to wait nine full days towards death. It is a pathetic condition when he has to endure what is in store for him; the time left before him, which is imperative as well as harrowing. He started spending those days fretfully, by creating imaginary executions intentionally in his mind, to stop the time from rushing forward and by telling himself that as long as his execution date is in 'future,' he is invulnerable and immortal.

“In addition to the doubling of a mind-within-a-mind-within-a-mind, 'The Secret Miracle' contains another doubling, that of the work-within-a-work, the subsidiary work whose structure and theme reflect that of the main work” (Gyrko 213). In his agitated state, Hladik becomes aware of the limited time. As he has not completed his work, he wanted a year more to complete his work. Hladik prays to God, “To justify me and justify Thee as well, I need one more year. Grant me those days, Thou who art the centuries and time itself” (Borges 128).

Ten minutes later, Hladik sleeps and again he shifts into a dream. In this dream, he is hiding in a Clementine library. He says to the librarian that he is looking for God. Again, the library which is Borges's favourite setting here links with the astounding nature of time. Hladik opens an atlas, which the librarian considers as 'worthless.' He touches a tiny letter on the map of India. "A voice that was everywhere spoke to him: The time for your labour has been granted" (Borges 128). When he wakes up, Hladik thought about the dream and concluded that as he heard the voice of the speaker only, the dream is a holy one.

The crucial day in his life has arrived. The soldiers arrive and he is now in his execution place. "The sergeant looked at his watch; it was eight forty-four. They had to wait until nine" (Borges 128). Borges uses the images of the clock to highlight the limited time left in Hladik's life. 'Sixteen minutes' were remaining in Hladik's life. He was in great fear. His hands were trembling. "A heavy drop of rain grazed Hladik's temple and rolled down his cheek; the sergeant called out the final order. The physical universe stopped" (Borges 129). The 'holy dream' has happened. The soldiers become immobile and the sergeant freezes. The entire world becomes frozen and motionless. He realises that time has halted for him. He has never thought that the dream will become a reality. The drop of water is still stuck, even after time has passed for Hladik. When he becomes conscious, he understands that God has granted him his request. "He had asked God for an entire year in which to finish his work; God in His omnipotence had granted him a year. God had performed for him a secret miracle: the German bullet would kill him, at the determined hour, but in Hladik's mind a year would pass between the order to fire and the discharge of the rifles" (Borges 130). At first, he is stupefied, then resigned and finally, grateful. He started rewriting and writing his play. The clock time has stopped for Hladik and he starts enjoying his version of time, which is "real-time" for him. It shows that God has performed a secret miracle. He utilises the time granted for him. As soon as he completes his work, the drop of water rolls down through his cheek, Hladik cries out and shakes his head. The bullets hit him. The last sentence of the story leaves a mystery. "Jaromir Hladik died on the twenty-ninth of March at 9:02 a.m" (Borges 131). The execution is set at 9 a.m. on the twenty-ninth of March; he died at 9:02 a.m. on the very same day. The whole universe gets halted and time becomes still for Hladik. The time he articulated in his works, various experiences of time in his dreams, and the circular obsessions support time elements in the story. The narrator is thereby creating a realistic portrayal of the events. When it is conjoined with historical time, it creates special effects for the readers. The story seems hyper-real and also creates a sense of unreality. Through the theme of time, Borges creates a metaphor for human life. The incorporation of chronological events, temporal and spatial elements, the shift from one place to another, mainly through his dreams is the main theme.

The secret miracle, granted to Hladik by God, is a miracle of time. Time is marvellously expanded and the moment of Hladik's execution is delayed to give him a year in which to complete his drama. "The outcome of 'The Secret Miracle,' the winning of the miracle, is adumbrated from the very beginning of the story, which, significantly begins not on the level of historical reality but on the level of the dream" (Gyurko 214). The time within Hladik's play, as within much of his life, is not chronological or linear but rather psychic and cyclical. The subtle and intricate distinction between objective time and subjective time becomes very challenging in this story. Thus Borges leads the readers through the collage of time, essentially fantastic in nature; intermittently diverting from reality to fantasy and then back to a cruel reality. As the title itself indicates, the flow of time here becomes a miracle, a miraculous mystery. "The South" is a story that demonstrates the author's ability to mix reality with fantasy and, more important, to show that the line between the two is not only very subtle but also of no real importance, for fantasy is just as much a part of the universe as so-called reality. It is this type of added dimension that makes Borges's fiction interesting and makes him a truly fascinating writer to read. The story is rooted in objective time. The story begins by referring to Johannes Dahlmann, who arrived in Buenos Aires in 1871 and his grandchild, the protagonist Juan Dahlmann, who became the secretary of a municipal library in 1939. The story focuses on some references to their family history and moves to the present situation. Late in February 1939, something happened to him. Dahlmann had succeeded in acquiring a copy of *The Thousand and One Nights* and was curious to read it. So that he did not wait for the elevator but hurried up the stairs. Then something blew to his face. He had become so oblivious to the reality that he had struck his head on the edge of a recently painted door. "On the face of the woman who opened the door to him he saw horror engraved, and the hand wiped across his face came away red with blood. The edge of a recently painted door which someone had forgotten to close had caused this wound" (Borges, "The South" 91).

He was able to sleep, but the moment he woke up at dawn, the condition was very pathetic. He was affected by fever and nightmares. Friends and relatives paid him visits, with exaggerated smiles, assured him that they thought he looked fine. "A week, eight days passed and they were like eight centuries" (Borges 92). The time experienced by the protagonist can be linked here with the traumatic experience that he is undergoing. It makes him feel like time is creeping. Here the popular notion of time can be analysed. Though the clock time is fixed by minutes and seconds and is the same for all, the time experienced by Dahlmann while he was suffering from pain makes him feel that time is at a slow pace. Bergson's pure duration or real duration, which is psychological in nature, can be applied here. The intensity of pain, sufferings affects time subjectively. So he felt eight days like eight centuries.

The horrible feeling while being affected with pain affects him psychologically and the expression 'horrible nights' can be linked with the pain and it affects his conception of time as well. "On another day, the surgeon told him he was healing and that; very soon, he would be able to go to his ranch for convalescence. Incredibly enough, the promised day arrived" (Borges 92). The craving for time to pass is another major tendency that is seen in human beings. Time appears creepy during a painful situation. And Dahlmann is waiting for the day, to leave the place and to go to his ranch. His mental condition can be linked here to the time that he experiences and how he needs to escape from the situation.

When he is moving towards his destination, his conception of time differs. He feels that time is enough for him. He walks through the coaches and finds an empty one. When the train started, he started reading *The Thousand and One Nights*. The description of the minute details and surroundings is another feature common to Borges's stories. "Tomorrow I'll wake up at the ranch, he thought, and it was as if he was two men at a time: the man who travelled through the autumn day and across the geography of the fatherland, and the other one, locked up in the sanitarium and subject to methodical servitude" (Borges 93). Dahlmann's wish to leave the place and his inner wish to suppress the pain related to the moment before he makes him feel to have a better time, better days.

Borges breaks the succession of chronological time making it so that his protagonist travels from the present to the past rather than from the present to the future. It can be seen that he travels back from the present to the past. His trip to the South, his encounter with the ruffians, and his acceptance of their challenge, which will lead to certain death, are all nothing but a dream, dreamt, it seems in the sanitarium, for death in a knife fight is the death that he, Dahlmann—the librarian who likes to identify himself with his heroic and romantic ancestors—would have preferred compared to that of the sanitarium.

"In a more enigmatic tale, 'The South,' we are never certain whether Juan Dahlmann dies in the gaucho knife fight that, as a second-generation immigrant, he conceives as being a truly Argentine death or whether such an end was the effect of hallucination as he lay dying in an operating theatre in Buenos Aires" (Williamson 7)

Conclusion

The notion of time itself is the creation of the experience of the human mind. It becomes splendid in literature. Time is unreal, which seems to be real. It is challenging to interpret this idea, as the human mind has already attributed a realistic notion to time. The analysis of time in these stories leads to a common thread with which they are bound; a painful experience that they underwent during the moments make them feel about the nature of time before them and how they are being affected because of it. In the case of Hladik in "The Secret Miracle," he wants time to be

extended before his imminent death. He is being granted one more year by God and he fulfills his last wish. But the narrator leaves ambiguity where it is not easy to say whether he was granted one more year. The portrayal of the events signifies that he at least enjoyed his own nature of time and was contented though death was sure. While in the case of Dahlmann in "The South" he also wants to escape from cruel reality, death, and pain. His journey to the south can be described as a journey to his own version of time, his version of reality in order to escape from reality which is cruel to him and thereby to attain satisfaction through death which is eventful.

Hladik's experience of time has a great effect as the story itself hints several concepts of time and the introduction of a storyline of play within the story and the experiences of the character can be linked to the experiences of Hladik himself. Miraculous nature of time is the peculiarity of the story creating suspense and curiosity. The pressure one undergoes due to the realisation of the time before, which cannot be changed and the cruel death before the protagonist makes the story to a psychological level.

Considering the south itself as a symbol for an alternative reality, it is not until the end, it is revealed that Dahlmann's experiences are his imagination. But the situations and the nature of time lead to ambiguity. The nature of the character his fascination towards the past, life in the south, and also *The Thousand and One Nights* has great relevance in the story. The story is full of references to time and situations which shows how he is suffering from pain due to the reality which is cruel to him. The days in the sanitarium makes him feel that time is creepy and is sluggish. His change in attitude can be seen in his awaiting the day to leave the hospital and to go to the south or to the past.

The exploration of different areas of time is an interesting field dealing with complex interpretations. "The Secret Miracle" and "The South," attract readers with its narrative beauty based on time. These stories deal with how fractured subjective time conflicts with the experience of objective time. Thus the stories lead the readers to a temporal journey with which the attention of readers is grasped until the end and the readers are lead to danger, hope and fear.

Borges's works are famous for its new way of representing ideas and its confusing nature. The enigmatic nature of time can be analysed in these stories and also in many other works where the concept of time itself is questioned through the representation of so called fixed time along with the subjectivity. The study can be extended by applying various theories of time and thereby developing a wider perspective on it.

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