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## A Comparative Perspective to the Mythological Concept of Escape from Time: An Archetypal Study

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### Abstract

Time, the concept had ever been a matter of baffling obscurity to the humankind. Measuring of time may be an extension of man's quest to define life itself, an inborn crave to count the uncountable, and to define the indefinite. No two critics may agree with the meaning of such eely and elusive philosophic or theological queries, when they are entangled within the scope of words with its grammatical gymnastics. The article, through a comparative approach, envisages how a worldview with an unpinned clock handles is presented in literature and how, and why, in many a literary works, the concept of time is destructed and deconstructed drastically. Writers, like O'Neill, Faulkner, Thoreau, Margaret Attwood and Kafka, from different continents, and of different time periods, in their classical works move towards the primeval time sense or towards the eternal bliss of timelessness. The scope of this article includes how and why the works like *The Sound and the Fury* (Faulkner), *The Emperor Jones* (O'Neill), *Walden* (Thoreau), *The Trial* (Kafka) or *Oryx and Crake* (Margaret Attwood), embrace a different time structure and the deeper underlying archetypal patterns beneath the surface layers of these literary works are laid bare with an archetypal perspective.

**Key words:** Existentialism, Pre-Oedipal stage, Archetype, Utopia.

### Introduction

Abraham was hundred, when fathered Isaac, claims Genesis of The Old Testament. It will be just rational, not blasphemous, if one checks the repeating rhythms of days in the calendar of Abraham's times and finds out, instead of three sixty five, one year was composed of ninety days, then Abraham might have just been in his mid twenties when his son was born and there is nothing queer and miraculous about the birth of Isaac! While crossing the Greenwich line, one loses or gains a day in life. One can even have two times at the same time. Camus' "Today or yesterday?" question will no more sound absurd if, while writing *The Outsider*, the writer was crossing Greenwich line!

The situations may sound quite fictional, but, the truth is that the age old, solidified truths can be twisted or distorted with the remoulding of the time measuring scales. Absurd may turn upside down and become mere naturalistic or realistic phenomenon...miracles may be transmuted into mere probabilities and possibilities... Measurement of time had ever been a brain teasing puzzle to humans since time immemorial. As Eliot measured life in "coffee spoons", modern industrial man does it with watch dials. Life is carved out with added and piled up numeric of time structures. The measuring extremities may vary from multiplicities of micro seconds and minutes to the eternal timelessness of primordial times.

Living in a world without ticking sounds and carefully crafted time zones is quite unimaginable in the existing world. But when we trace back human history to the possible extremities, the existence of a timeless zone is an unavoidable

probability. Transcending the laws of clock time one may enter into ultimate possibility of primordial zone or return to the symbolic womb of life as mentioned by Mircea Eliade in her *Myth and Reality* as *regressus ad uterum* (return to the origin). The hidden crave to go back to the paradisiacal bliss is a repeating motif in art and literature, and the archetypal escape from time is inextricably intertwined with the destruction of the accepted time-matrix.

### **Timelessness: an archetypal overview of literary works.**

“I got plenty of *time* to escape from here” (O’Neill, 12). Like a mighty Marlowian hero, the fallen, still unconquered emperor of O’Neill’s *The Emperor Jones* proclaims his unwillingness to surrender. While portraying this quest myth, a night-long journey into the crevices and secrecies of forest, O’Neill dethrones both the emperor and monarchial powers of age old time laws alike. The play has eight scenes and in scene two, when Jones enters the forest, he says “Well, here I is. In de nick o’ *time* too”. Jones and the author have well defined and inculcated sense of time structure. In scene three it reads in parenthesis, “Nine o’ clock. In the forest”. Scene four shows “Eleven o’ clock”, in scene five it’s “one o’ clock”, in six and seven it’s, “Three o’ clock” and “Five o’clock”. But in the final scene O’Neill mentions time as mere “Dawn”, no chronology of exact timing is followed here. The emperor loses his man-made, mechanical time sense, when re-enters into his primordial true self. As the critic Egil Tornquist in *O’Neill’s Philosophical and Literary Paragons* argues Jones in *The Emperor Jones* relives his own and his ethnic past and the journey into the dark forest is the journey back to his ethnic origin and breaking with the synthetic, man made time systems. O’Neill portrays the bliss and the wild splendor of archetypal eternity, where no death can conquer him, no more past can haunt him and no more ticking of the clock handles can distract the loud drum beats of nature anymore... in death he has recaptured the lost rapport with his own true ethnic and primordial essence. Jones lies dead “at the foot of the *gigantic tree* and by the edge of *great river*”, both being the archetypal symbols of regeneration and rebirth. Escaping from time, the empire, as an archetypal scapegoat, revives his own elemental self, regenerating the country and its people.

If Jones is set in the primordial ambience and its timelessness, Faulkner places his Quentin of *The Sound and the Fury* in the academic landscape of Harvard University. Quentin becomes the mouthpiece of the author himself to get rid of the concept of time.

In Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*, a novel of multiple narratives, Quentin, a Harvard student, when, is on the verge of committing suicide, hurls and breaks his watch against the corner of his dresser. But even after his death the watch ticks, challenging man’s attempts to shake off the remnants of mechanical age clinging closer to his existence.

Time is dead as long as it is being clicked off by little wheels; only when the clock stops does time come to life. (Faulkner, 112).

Before death Quentin may be defying the laws of the clock time by breaking his watch, to make the true time come to life. But, even death can’t defy, that much man is entrapped within the systems and structures of the society.

In *The Sound and the Fury* the watch symbol becomes synonymous with the patriarchal authority, since, when Quentin is trying to emancipate himself from time, in an angst ridden moment, he may be throwing away the age old, ever domineering patriarchal norms, for the watch is a gift from his father. For him death is a u-turn back to pre-oedipal stage where the wholeness and unity with maternal body is not separated by the paternal phallic symbol. Mother will no more be an

“unattainable Madonna” for them, no language is there to alienate him from their immediate need for oneness and unity. Timelessness may be feasible with the symbolic stage of Julia Kristeva or with the pre- oedipal bliss envisaged by Lacan.

Again, Quentin, as an archetypal scapegoat, is tainted with the incestuous relationship with his sister, Caddy. He is tarnished with their sins and Faulkner may be trying to rejuvenate the lost order by Quentin’s death by water, echoing Eliotian “Death by water” and Prospero’s destruction of magical books by water. As Jan Kott in *The Tempest or Repetition* argues, Prospero drowns books, instead of traditional way of burning magical books to ingrain the text with archetypal water imagery. Instead of the sinners and deceivers, the books, here being the archetypal symbol of scapegoat, are drowned, reviving the lost order that was once lost by the usurpation of kingdom and there by violating the divine rights.

Thoreau in his monumental work *Walden*, harmonizes the spiritual enlightenment with the tranquil rhythms of nature. Life is woven around the Walden Pond, being perfectly in tune with the seasonal times. With mathematical accuracy, he provides the number of days that he spent at Walden. Two years, two months and two days, exactly, is the time span of his stay. But only in this description ends the role of the calendar time. Thereafter Thoreau describes time in terms of seasons. From spring to spring he dwells there sharing earth with ants and insects, and playing hide and seek with monkey. With vigour and vitality and with all its zest and celebrations Thoreau presents word pictures of each season, without allowing the technical and mechanical time to intrude.

In summer he cultivates bean fields, for him the hot summer is the time for complete physical activity. Here in Walden there is “ a *time* to reap and a *time* to sow”, but a time that is perfectly in accordance with nature and its natural rhythms .

For Thoreau, chilling winter and its snowy silence is most befitted to speak to one’s own soul. In winter he fathoms the Walden Pond which is but the extension of fathoming of his own soul. Walden Pond was considered to be of indefinite depth, but Thoreau demystifies this popular disbelief fathoming its depth. Winter is the time of silence and snow, in the deeper stillness and silence of his heart, when it snows outside, he finds out himself fathoming the oceanic depths of his own soul. His soul migrates with the migrating birds, wanders with the frozen winter winds and he is but nature itself, a man beyond the systems and ‘isms’ resonating Nietzschean concept of the wild and untutored ideal man .But in Walden, the man escapes from synthetic time, being one with nature he recaptures his primeval life, becoming one with nature itself.

In *Walden* each season presents its own spiritual reverberations. When winter melts into spring, large ice bergs burst out against the shores reminding Thoreau of Judgment Day, purging him of all his sins and reminiscent of the “Spiritual leap into faith”, of Soren Kierkegaard. Existential philosophies dismiss the essence of the concept of time. Time is judged, not by duration, but by its intensity. Time has only its relative value there. In Heidegger’s *Being and Time* (1927) time is defined as something unique in man’s consciousness. It’s the ability to situate one’s present within a broader context of past and future, assertion of one’s freedom in the midst of determinations. Thoreau in *Walden* discarding the technical time sense and embraces seasonal time adapting himself to the leap into faith. Even Einstein’s Relativity theory, where he questions the validity of physical reference points and Derrida’s dismissal of intellectual reference points gain reflection in the new concept of existential time.

Kafka, the maestro of absurd drama, abandons formal time scale in his *The Trial*. Along with O’Neill’s Jones, Thoreau and Faulkner’s Quentin, Kafka’s Joseph .K too discards the mechanical time sense. As Thoreau clings back to the seasonal cycle in the “mad pursuit” to reinstate the natural time schemes, Kafka describes time as mere morning, noon and night. Joseph

.K. lives in not in an age without clocks and watches; still, Kafka is steadfast to natural time. Browning's *Pippa Passes* too is divided into morning, noon, evening and night. Even the Victorian writers with all their intellectual leg pulls and compromises show affinity with natural time sense. Joseph .K was arrested on his thirtieth birthday and is murdered in a quarry on the thirty first birthday. The quarry is interpreted to have similarities with altar. On a fine morning the protagonist was arrested for no reason and a reasonless sense of guilt is attributed to him. His own alienation from his true self might have triggered the sense of guilt in Joseph. K. It might have been the other in him that was sacrificed in quarry –like altar, as Jones of O'Neill does in *The Emperor Jones* is murdered beside the age- old altar. Both Kafka and O'Neill finally escape from the mathematical accuracy of time sense. The imagery of altar and timelessness intrude into the texture of both these works.

Timelessness plays pivotal role in Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*, an ecological utopia, demolishing hierarchies in the society by creating a new breed of hybrids called crakers. Snowman, the only existing human, out of habit, looks frequently into his broken watch and sitting on the tree. If Faulkner's Quentin broke his watch in violent fury, here Snowman mourns over his lost sense of time.

His time, what a bankrupt idea, as if he's been given a box of time belonging to him alone, stuffed to the brim with hours and minutes that he can spend like money. Trouble is the box has holes in it and the time is running out, no matter what he does with it. (Atwood, 17)

Atwood in her *Oryx and Crake* stands against an ecological utopia. But her ideal utopia is entangled with timelessness and its prehistoric era of perfect harmony with nature. Swinging back to an anti utopian society, calling back the suspended time sense, Atwood envisions a society rooted in hierarchies, systems and its ever ongoing exploitations. Timelessness is transfigured into ultimate time sense, when equality in the utopia is shifted to hierarchies and its exploitative undertones. Again the archetypal symbol of timelessness is depicted here with the imagery of tree, the archetype for immortality and regeneration. As Faulkner, Kafka, Thoreau or O'Neill, Atwood also lays bare the unholy alliance of mechanical time structure with the preset and mechanized lives of human beings.

## Conclusion

Literary classics like *The Emperor Jones*, *Walden*, *The Sound and the Fury*, *The Trial* and *Oryx and Crake* whirl away the traditional concept of time and bear an urgency towards a timeless zones suspending man-made mechanical time sense. In all the works the archetypal escape from time is accompanied by typical pagan archetypes like river, tree, forest or altar, the symbolic motifs for regeneration and rebirth. The crave for the bliss of timelessness or a different time concept binds these works together and they idealize primordial era where life was not anatomized into minutes and seconds. In these works destruction of time adds momentum to reinstate and recapture the lost harmony between man and nature and between man and his deeper inner instincts. All these works, departing from the economy-led, time-led spiritually torpid systems, embrace rejuvenation and revitalization of primordial life.

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