



A Critique of Bergsonian Time and Free Will versus Fictional Representations of Time in Select Masterpieces in English Literature

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Abstract

Time in literary writings happen to be one of the most important considerations like space, story and characters. There are scores of time frames such as flashback and flashforward; in medias res; time travel; time dilation, time paradoxes, and frozen time. Two impressive popular subgenres of speculative fictions happen to be deep time and compressed time fictions. Deep time fictions are set in vast temporal scales, often geological and cosmic, emphasizing the insignificance of human existence in the face of such immense periods, and is explored through various literary and artistic forms. In contrast, compressed time or short-term fictions emphasize a much smaller timeframe, like a human existence or a few generations, focusing on events that occur within a limited period. In this context, this paper attempts at a comparative study of the effective use of time in "Children of Time" by Adrian Tchaikovsky and "Of Mice and Men" by John Steinbeck. Tchaikovsky's novel explores the rise of a civilization made up of genetically modified Portia labiata spiders on a terraformed exoplanet, all under the watchful guidance of an artificial intelligence modeled after one of the human terraformers whereas Steinbeck's "Of Mice and Men" tells the poignant story of George Milton and Lennie Small, two itinerant ranch workers navigating the hardships of the Great Depression as they search for work across California. So far as the concept of time is concerned, Children of Time reflects on a central, multifaceted concept, explored through the vast timescales of evolution whereas in Of Mice and Men, time is a significant element, not just as a backdrop but as a driver of the characters' actions and the story's tragic outcome. The novella's time frame is limited to a few days, highlighting the fleeting nature of their dreams and the harsh reality of their lives. Time seems to be highly unrealistic and fictional in deep time fictions whereas time is real and valuable in the compressed time fictions. Not only this, H.G.Wells' time travel to future in The Time Machine, the nonlinear time frames of Virginia Woolf and Salman Rushdie, and many such potential authors give us the idea of time as envisaged by Bergson.

Keywords: Deep time, compressed time, human existence, realistic, unrealistic, time frame

1. Introduction

1.1 Henri Bergson and His "Time and Free Will"

"Time present and time past / Are both perhaps present in time future, / and time future contained in time past." (T.S.Eliot, "Burnt Norton," *Four Quartets*)

The critical concept of Bergson challenges traditional views of time and free will. He argues that temporal situations are not a continuation of distinct, fathomable instances; it is

rather an unceasing, streaming practice, which he recognizes as "duration." This lived experience of time, Bergson suggests, is essential to understanding free will. He proposes that free will is not an illusion, but a real, fundamental aspect of human consciousness, intertwined with the concept of duration.

Bergson makes a distinction between the more static, quantifiable time used in science and mathematics and the "real" experience of time, which he refers to as duration. Duration is a subjective, qualitative experience that is impossible to measure or divide into separate parts. He contends that duration and free will are closely related. Decisions and actions are made within the fluid and interconnected lived experience of time. His notion of duration contradicts conventional determinism, which holds that all actions are predestined by earlier causes. According to him, there is space for spontaneity, originality, and the creation of new possibilities within the flow of time. In order to comprehend time and free will, he highlights the value of intuition and firsthand experience. He contends that abstract, analytical thinking is not enough to understand the real essence of duration and the freedom involved in it. Later in his writings, the theory of *élan vital* i.e. an impelling creative force guiding life's growth was developed. This theory also supports his idea of a dynamic, non-deterministic world where free will exists. Essentially, Bergson's theory of time and free will recommends that we must move the concept of time away from its static, quantifiable sense to a dynamic, qualitative sense that is essential to human consciousness and the potential for real freedom.

1.2 Time in Literary Writings

"Each time was a new time and he never thought about the past when he was doing it." (Ernst Hemingway, *The Oldman and the Sea*)

Time is not enough in 24 hours a day; 365 days a year; and past, present and future. It comes anew every moment, and surprisingly, it never comes back in life once again. In a creative form, it needs to go beyond this natural plan. As the most precious element on this earth, the creative authors feel like fantasizing this in order to avail it with a vast expanse so that days could be longer and twilights could be enjoyable. We have come across a very common concept associated with literature is the three classical unities of time, place and action in classical drama. Then, flashback and flash forward are the two commonly adopted time frames. There are writings such as Iain Banks's "Use of Weapons," Martin Amis's "Time's Arrow," and Julia Alvarez's "How the García Girls Lost Their Accents." Writings that engage incorporating *in medias res* frequently use flashback and nonlinear narrative techniques for elucidation to fill in the backstory. For example, in Homer's *Odyssey*, the reader initially gets the idea about Odysseus's journey when he is confined forcefully on Ogygia in Calypso's island. Similarly, the idea of time travel embodies the incapability to pass through time in a principally rectilinear manner. Here, Mitchel's "The Clock That Went Backward" could be taken as an example of time travel.

In essence, speculative fiction uses time not just as a setting but as a powerful tool for exploring philosophical and scientific ideas, challenging our understanding of reality and the human condition. Let's talk about a few of these ideas. Time travel is a popular story element. It's about moving through time, to the past or future often using a time machine or portal. Time travel raises tricky questions about cause and effect, paradoxes, and changing history. Time loops are different. They trap someone in a cycle of events that keep repeating. The person lives the same day or period over and over. This can make us

think about who we are, if we have free will, and what our actions mean when time is limited. Sci-fi stories also like to play with alternate realities and parallel universes. These often look at timelines that split or universes where different choices create new realities. This lets us imagine "what if" and see how different paths change history and fate. Time dilation is another cool idea. It's when time passes for different people (because of speed or gravity). Sci-fi stories about space travel often use this idea. Time dilation can make characters experience very different amounts of time compared to others. This can change how they see events and their own lives. Paradoxes in time exhibit contradictions that is created while attempting to alter the past, just like the grandfather paradox; and at the same time, frozen time represents still or make the pace controlled significantly, permitting stretched reflection or manipulation. Anti-time is a hypothetical concept of time flowing in the opposite direction relative to a reference frame. Now, in order to delve deep into the fictional time, a couple of case studies viz. one from compressed time and the other from deep time can be taken for analysis here.

2. Compressed Time Fiction

Also known as flash fiction or micro fiction, focuses on telling a complete story within a very short word count, often under 1,000 words, emphasizing conciseness and vivid language. The characteristics of compressed time fiction are brevity which defines feature is its short length, forcing writers to be highly selective and economical with language. Then, conciseness which refers to very word matters, and there's little room for unnecessary details or exposition. Vividness of language, that is writers use strong imagery and impactful language to create a memorable experience in a limited space. The goal in this way is to convey a strong emotional or thematic message in a small amount of text.

Compressed narration happens to be a technique where writers summarize events or actions in a few brief sentences or paragraphs to speed up the plot. The benefits include increased tension, that is the compressed timeframe can heighten suspense and create a sense of urgency. It forces writers to prioritize the most important aspects of the story. The brevity can draw readers in and keep them engaged.

2.1 Of Mice and Men as a Compressed Time Fiction

In *Of Mice and Men* (1937) by John Steinbeck (1902-68), time is a significant element, not just as a backdrop but as a driver of the characters' actions and the story's tragic outcome. The novella's time frame is limited to a few days, highlighting the fleeting nature of their dreams and the harsh reality of their lives.

Two asylum seeking laborers named George and Lennie, have been dropped off at a bus a mile from the California ranch on which they are supposed to begin their work. George is a dark-skinned, small man with "sharp, strong features." His friend, Lennie, is his contrary, a huge man with a "shapeless" face. Parched with thirst, the two make a stop in a clearing at a pool and resolve to camp for the evening. While the two chats, it is revealed that Lennie has a mental disability, and is extremely devoted to George and reliant on him for protection and advice. George discovers that petting-obsessed Lennie carries around and fondling a lifeless mouse. George tosses it aside in a rage, afraid that Lennie would get sick from the dead animal. George deafeningly grumbles that his life would be simpler without looking after Lennie, but the reader gets the feeling that friendship and devotion of them is also reciprocated. He and Lennie have a common dream of owning their own plot of land, farming it, and, to the great joy of Lennie,

hovering rabbits. George ends up the evening by taking Lennie through the tale he habitually recounts to him of what life shall be in such a paradise.

Those men return the following day to the ranch that is close by. George is afraid of how the boss will behave toward Lennie and makes him keep quiet, stipulating that he will talk for him. He lies, saying both of them travel together because they are partners and a horse kicked Lennie in the head as a child. They are hired. They encounter Candy, an old "swamper," or handyman, with a missing hand and an extremely old dog, and Curley, the boss's ill-natured son. Curley is married afresh, protective of his coquettish female counterpart, and rife with jealous suspicion. When George and Lennie are alone in the bunkhouse, Curley's wife shows up and charms them. Lennie finds her "purty," but George, knowing the trouble that can arise from messing with the lady and her husband, tells Lennie to leave her alone. The ranch-hands soon comes back from the fields for lunch, and George and Lennie encounter Slim, the able mule driver who exercises immense power on the ranch. Slim makes a remark about the uniqueness of friendship such as that between George and Lennie. Carlson, another ranch-hand, makes a remark that speaks about Slim's dog having borne puppies earlier, and they might give a puppy to Candy while putting down Candy's old useless dog. The next day, George shares with Slim that he and Lennie are not cousins, but childhood friends.

He explains how Lennie has frequently landed them in distress. For example, they were driven away from their last ranch job due to the fact that Lennie attempted to feel a woman's dress and was suspected of rape. Slim promises to give Lennie one of his puppies, and Carlson keeps pressuring Candy to put his old dog to death. When Slim assents to Carlson, stating that death would be a merciful end to the suffering animal, Candy acquiesces. Carlson, before taking the dog outside, promises to do the job with discomfiture. Slim works in the barn, and Curley, who is frantically looking for his wife, walks into the barn to attack Slim. Candy hears George and Lennie discussing about how they are going to purchase land, and offers his lifetime savings if they will allow him to reside there too.

Three of them decide to keep their plan secret from anyone else. Slim goes back to the bunkhouse, scolding Curley for suspecting. Curley, looking for an easy goal for his wrath, stumbles upon Lennie and starts a duel with him. Lennie kills Curley's hand in the fight. Slim warns Curley that if he attempts to get George and Lennie fired, he will be the joke of the ranch. The following evening, the majority of the men head to the local brothel. Lennie is left alone with the isolated, Black stable-hand, Crooks, and Candy. Curley's wife gets flirtatious with them and does not go until the other men come back home.

She sees the cuts on Lennie's face and assumes that he, rather than a piece of equipment as Curley insisted, injured her husband. This idea delights her. The following day, Lennie kills his puppy by accident in the barn. Curley's wife comes and comforts him. She confesses that life with Curley is a let-down, and wishes she had pursued her dream to be an actress. She says she'd let him touch her hair since he loves to touch soft things, and when he holds too hard, she screams. In the process of trying to shut her up, he falls and breaks her neck by mistake. Lennie runs back to a Salinas River pool that George had chosen as a place for the two of them to meet in case the other of them got into trouble. George arrives at this pool while the men at the ranch learn what has occurred and form a lynch mob. To Lennie's surprise, George is not angry with him for committing "a bad

thing." George starts to explain the story of the farm that they will own together. While explaining the rabbits that Lennie will take care of, the noise of the lynch mob on its way gets lurid.

George fires his friend at the back of the head. When the other men come, George makes them think that Lennie had the gun, and that George struggled it from him and killed him. Slim alone knows what has truly occurred, that George has shot his friend out of kindness. Slim sympathetically guides him altogether, and the others, totally confused, stand by and watch them walk away.

The story spans only a few days, from George and Lennie's arrival at the ranch to the tragic end, emphasizing the brevity of their time together and the quick downfall of their hopes. George and Lennie's constant talk of owning their own land and farm represents their yearning for a future beyond their current harsh reality, a future that is ultimately snatched away by fate. The title, "Of Mice and Men," is taken from Robert Burns's poem "To a Mouse," which says, "The best laid schemes o' mice and men/ Gang aft agley." This emphasizes the idea that circumstances or fate can ruin even the most well-laid plans. The narrative illustrates how both positive and negative changes can occur with time. The harsh realities of their lives and the events that transpire gradually erode the characters' once vivid dreams. The US Great Depression, which is widely regarded as a time of economic hardship and social unrest that influences the lives and aspirations of the characters, serves as the story's backdrop. The characters' present and future are also shaped by their relationships and experiences from the past. The events of the story are influenced by George's history with Lennie as well as the experiences of the other characters on the ranch. The terrible conclusion, in which George is compelled to murder Lennie presupposes the account of the pointlessness of nightmares and the austerity of destiny.

3. The Concept of Deep Time

John McPhee made the term "deep time" popular in the late seventies. "Deep time" points to the huge timescale of geological ages and cosmic happenings going way beyond human lives and historical accounts. Written works and artistic records play a key part to grasp deep time, with research looking at how deep time shows up in books and art. The idea of "deep time" came about as a figure of speech used by thinkers, poets, and nature experts to look into how life began before written history. Deep time informs us about various disciplines, including geology, anthropology, and literary studies. Deep time fiction explores narratives that delve into vast expanses of geological and cosmic time, often examining the origins of life, the evolution of civilizations, and the long-term consequences of human actions on a planetary scale. While deep time fiction shares some thematic overlaps with science fiction and speculative fiction, it often focuses more on the vastness of time and its impact on the long-term future or past, rather than on technological advancements or alternate realities. The concept of deep time can also be seen as a metaphor for the vastness of history and the interconnectedness of all things in fictional representations.

3.1 Deep Time in *Children of Time*

Adrian Tchaikovsky (1972-) wrote the science fiction book *Children of Time* in 2015. In the novel, an artificial intelligence modeled after the personality of one of the planet's human

terraformers guides the development of a civilization of genetically altered *Portia labiata* (arachnoid) on a terraformed exoplanet.

As the story goes on, Dr. Kern discovers that an anti-technology group agent is on board the ship and is going to overload the reactor. She quickly escapes on an escape pod before anyone else can. In a landing craft, the monkey payload is jettisoned from the ship, but it burns up upon atmospheric entry. Since Kern's world has no monkeys and its ecosystems were initially seeded with as few potential rival species as possible for Kern's experiment.

Many millennia pass. Civilization reemerges on Earth from the hunter-gathering progeny of stayers. They eventually salvage machines left behind from Kern's time, known as the Old Empire. The last remnants of humanity are headed to Kern's World on-board the starship *Gilgamesh*. They hope to find a paradise and are unaware of the uplifted *Portiid* spiders. Antagonizing Dr. Kern, who has become powerful, crazed, and xenophobic over the centuries, the *Gilgamesh* takes a century of detour to a nearby system that turns out to be uninhabitable. The novel contrasts the rapid advancement of the spiders' societies with the decline of the last human crew into conflict and savagery. This is primarily noticed through the eyes of Holsten Mason, the important traditionalist of the *Gilgamesh*.

After the *Gilgamesh* returns to Kern's World, the two narratives clash, putting one or both sides at risk of extermination. The *Portiids* devise a plan that saves both their world and the invaders. They invite the last humans to live with them on Kern's World, drawing on past genetic memories known as "Understandings." These memories show that working together is the better choice.

Dr. Avrana Kern is the Old Empire's only known survivor. She is a cynical, egotistical woman who wants to "create new sentient life" in the image of humanity. She survives the obliteration of her ship and spends centuries in suspended animation inside an observation satellite, orbiting the only world she was able to seed with a gene-editing nanovirus. This technology improves the animal population below. After millennia of solitude and physical decay, she falsely denies the humanity of the *Gilgamesh* crew, whom she sees as her main threat, until the starship returns to her world centuries later.

Commander Guyen leads the *Gilgamesh*. He often uses autocratic authority over the expedition and the sleeping human passengers. Guyen takes the ark ship to another terraformed world after Kern forces his hand. He finds out experimental Old Empire technology that can incorporate a human psyche to a complex computer. He eventually dedicates himself to a new goal: uploading his mind to the *Gilgamesh* computer to gain better control over the ship before heading back to Kern's World.

Holsten is the chief classicist of the *Gilgamesh*, tasked with interpreting a key Old Empire language, "Imperial C." His main job is to help the ark ship steer the unknown regions and technologies of the Old Empire. However, he gradually takes on a higher objective: creating a new cultural legacy for humanity based on the historical narrative he lived through while on the *Gilgamesh*.

Lain is the chief engineer of the *Gilgamesh* and becomes its *de facto* leader. She often has to keep the ark ship running despite major mechanical issues. She spends decades guiding and protecting "the tribe" – mostly offsprings of engineers – to preserve the vessel itself. Initially, Lain opposes Guyen, but she transforms into the spiritual leader of the

Gilgamesh's ship-born generations. If Guyen is the villain in Holsten's story, Lain is clearly the heroine.

Vitas is the chief science officer of the Gilgamesh and values professional objectivity. She is capable of significant research but her scientific interest, clinging to tradition, and personal insecurities often lead her to make mistakes. Holsten views her as robotic and remarkably unfading. Karst is the chief of security on the Gilgamesh. He is blunt but shows himself to be a careful leader by limiting weapon access during the ship's internal conflicts. Initially threatened by the tough gunslinger, Holsten learns to respect Karst by the end of the novel. Karst reveals a heroic, though vulnerable side. The spiders in this novel span thousands of years and multiple generations of Portiid spiders. Each spider has its own identity, life, and experiences, along with their genetic memories called "Understandings." The narrative refers to its main and supporting characters by four different names based on unique personalities or historical roles.

Time has been presented in the following breakdown in the novel. It says about evolutionary time, that the story spans millennia, showcasing the evolution of the spider species on Kern's World, who are uplifted by a human-designed nanovirus, and their eventual development into a complex, intelligent civilization. Then, human time, that is the human characters, trapped in cryosleep on the Gilgamesh, experience time differently, with long periods of stasis and relativistic travel creating significant jumps in time for them. This is followed by contrasting perspectives, that is the narrative juxtaposes the long, slow evolution of the spiders with the human experience of time, highlighting the different ways civilizations perceive and interact with time.

There is a reference of cryosleep and relativistic travel, that is the novel uses cryosleep and relativistic travel as narrative devices to emphasize the vastness of time and the challenges of maintaining a consistent narrative across such extended periods. Similarly, Jarring Time Jumps, refers to the fact that the narrative deliberately uses jarring time jumps, throwing the reader into the perspective of characters who have awakened after centuries in cryosleep, forcing them to catch up with the intervening events. The characters' understanding of time is apparently noticed in the novel as it explores how characters, both human and spider, grapple with the concept of time, including their understanding of their own place in the timeline and the consequences of their actions.

4. Critical Discussion and Conclusion

"No people whose word for 'yesterday' is the same as their word for 'tomorrow' can be said to have a firm grip on the time." (Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*)

Time has been reflected in a uniform manner in some narratives whereas in some others, it takes a philosophical turn. But, as the interpretation continues, the postmodern narratives experiment more fantastically on it. It would be worthwhile to refer to the concept of time outlined by French philosopher Henri Bergson. It says that the traditional, scientific understanding of time as a homogenous, measurable quantity. Bergson argued that true, subjective experience of time, or lived time, is a fluid, continuous flow, not a series of discrete moments. This entails that distortion of time can give rise to creative means of narration as it has happened to many such we-known novels so far. For example, in H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine*, he states, "We all have our time machines, don't we?" The Time

Traveler's journey takes him to the year 802,701 A.D. He also travels 30 million years into the future, witnessing the Earth's final decline as the sun cools. The novel examines themes of class conflict and the future of humanity. In Virginia Woolf's novels, time is not a linear, objective force; it is a fluid, subjective experience. She explores how characters perceive and interact with time, often breaking away from traditional narrative structures that follow chronological order. Woolf's works show the flexibility of time, with characters experiencing moments of heightened awareness or vividly recalling the past, blurring the lines between present and past. In Ernest Hemingway's stories, time is often seen as a fluid and subjective element rather than a strict chronological sequence. He uses techniques like stream-of-consciousness and flashbacks to create a sense of urgency and emotional depth, reflecting the chaotic nature of war, loss, and the human experience. His stories also highlight the cyclical nature of time and how the past influences the present. In Salman Rushdie's fiction, time is often examined as a dynamic and fragmented experience instead of a linear progression. His novels, predominantly *Midnight's Children* and *The Satanic Verses*, exhibit experimentation with diverse temporal dimensions, leaving aside the lines between past, present, and future. Bergson's notion of time and free will happen to be a guiding light for the artistic creators to brood over all the possible configurations of time and will that envisage authorial freedom (at par with the quote from William Shakespeare "Let every man be master of his time," (Act.3, Sc-1, *Macbeth*) to go outside the acknowledged designs and envisage more active and philosophical works.

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