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Form and Theory of Fiction

The Broken Wheel of Time:
Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano* and the Disorientation of Space/Time

Stories want to unfold. Left alone, story movement is uni-directional. Discourse wants to arrange. Left to its own devices its instinct is to repackage and reorder through arrangement, pattern, and symmetry. Discourse breaks the unidirectional tendency of story and complicates and dislocates time.

According to Gérard Genette's classic consideration of time in narrative, *Narrative Discourse Revisited*, and through Rimmon-Kenan's standard re-thinking of Genette's concepts of time, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*, discourse time has been seen as a structural process of order, frequency, and duration. Spread over both discourse time (the time of the narrative arrangement) and story time (the time span within the story), the progression of time has been studied in how it structures the text and how the reader experiences the text. Concepts such as analepsis, prolepsis, summary, scene, ellipsis, and descriptive pause, flow from these considerations. All of these terms order time in narrative, naming what is occurring in a structured manner, codifying each shift of time in the text.

The idea of time's flow as an ordered construction and manipulation was augmented by a modernistic view of time particularly articulated by theorists such as Joseph Frank and Mikhail Bakhtin. Both theorists discuss the concept of time as spatialized. In "Spatial Form in Modern Literature," Joseph Frank's considers time not as a uni-directional line, but as a patterning that creates a space/time texture in the story. Instead of an orderly construct of events unfolding one after the other, or at least anchored one to the next, events of time become associative and symbolic. Time builds via overlapping references

that demand to be read in conversation with one another across the text rather than as a litany of unfolding events through the text.¹

Bakhtin wrote, in *The Dialogic Imagination*, about the concept of space and time being inseparable. He called this idea the chronotope, “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature” (84). He theorizes that time thickens and space becomes responsive to movements of time. In this way, time becomes a plotting or blueprinting on top of the text, demanding that readers ignore the desire of unidirectional linearity and instead work within the weft and weave of the text to create associative meaning within the text’s texture. The manipulation of time becomes as much an act of creating navigatable story-space as it does an act of following plot.

What interests me, in the consideration of time in narrative, is how the manipulation of order, frequency, and duration and the arrangement of text on the page creates a particular experience of time for the reader. In *Under the Volcano*, Lowry hardly ever lets the reader settle into a single time. He structures his novel so that the “present” is completely undermined by the past, and so that the “past” is again undermined by both its past and future. He freezes and stalls time, catching it in a synchronic/diachronic net. He sends both reader and character zooming back in time for moments – sometimes no longer than a few lines, sometimes for multiple pages – before bringing them back to the present. Often Lowry holds readers and characters in present time only for a few beats before sending them off again. Other times he lingers in the present, allowing the reader and character to rest in the timeline. At times he does away with time altogether, making the story impossible to plot as he sends readers and characters into a void of imagined conversations, events, and histories. In this manner, Lowry plays a game of one step forward, two steps back with the text, creating a pacing that is almost impossible to sink into and a story that becomes tenuously traceable. This creates a reading that must be

¹ This is a rephrasing/reinterpretation of the concept of space/time as presented in the essay by Roger Anderson entitled “The Optics of Narration: Visual Composition in Crime and Punishment,” published in Anderson’s book, *Russian Narrative and Visual Art*.

carefully navigated and is often so disorienting that plot falls completely away, transposing the experience of reading into an act of tracking.

The use of words such as “navigate” and “track” is deliberate, as Lowry creates a spatial sense of time in his novel. His text must be mapped, hours and minutes transfiguring into notations of longitude and latitude. The characters exist in a kind of dreamscape, loose balls in a pinball machine, discrete floating forms in a lava lamp. They only connect at specific moments of time, spending the rest of the text lost in their own worlds of thought and time displacements. Even when time marks are given they often contradict one another, almost as if each character started in the text at a different point and no one reminded them to synchronize their watches.

Lowry creates these time discordances in three primary constructions. He juxtaposes chapters and focalization, constantly switching which character controls the time mark. He plays with analepsis, prolepsis, and descriptive pause, drastically effecting the reader’s perception of order, duration, and frequency. And he plants multiple symbols of time into the novel, generating a spatial texture as readers navigate their meaning back and forth between the chapters.

The time marks in the novel are fascinating as they are the only element that attempts to keep the story moving forward in a linear line. The progression is as follows:

Chapter One: November 2, 1939 from 5 p.m. to 8 p.m.

We know this as the narrator describes the time as “towards sunset” (4). According to sunrise and sunset charts, this would be close to 5 p.m. The chapter covers roughly three hours, concluding before Vigil meets Laruelle at the Cervecería XX at 8:30 pm. The time is marked both by the narrator (sunset) and Laruelle (“looked at his watch – Vigil would not come for half an hour yet” (43).)

Chapter Two: Begins at 7 a.m. in 1938.

The time is marked by Yvonne, “glanced defensively round the square...brilliant in the seven o’clock morning sunlight” (46).

Chapter Three: 8:30 a.m.

Geoffrey marks the time, “It’s still only eight-thirty” (77).

Chapter Four: Starts approximately between 10:30 a.m. and 11:00 a.m.

Hugh marks the time by his arrival, as filtered through information provided by Geoffrey in chapter three where readers are informed by Geoffrey that Hugh's train is due at "Half past ten, eleven" (76).

Chapter Five: Various times, which overlap with the time contained in chapter four.

Geoffrey marks the time as 10:45 a.m. by his watch (142) but he hears a clock tower chime twenty-three times (142). Later he marks the time as 12:15 (148).

Chapter Six: Between 12:15 p.m. and 1:00 p.m.

Time is marked here only by the reader's tracing of events and inferring time from a statement made by Laurelle, "But your bus won't leave till two-thirty. You have over an hour"(200).

Chapter Seven: 1:20 to sometime past 2:07

Time is marked by Geoffrey, "On the side of the drunken madly revolving world hurtling at 1:20 P.M. toward Hercules' Butterfly the house seemed a bad idea, the Consul thought-" (204) and "At last the earth had stopped spinning with the motion of the Infernal Machine. The last house was still, the last tree rooted again. It was seven minutes past two by his watch" (234).

Chapter Eight: 2:30, 2:40, or 2:50

Marked by Laurelle in chapter six, "But your bus won't leave till two-thirty. You have over an hour"(200) and by the narrator, "The clock over the market arch, like the one in Rupert Brooke, said ten to three; but it was twenty to" (242).

Chapter Nine: No marked time

The chapter is focalized through Yvonne but no specific time is mentioned. Readers know that it is getting late in the afternoon through two descriptions, "bright late sunlight" (289) and "into the evening" (291).

Chapter Ten: Half past five

Marked by Geoffrey, "An orderly little clock behind the bar called him to his senses, its ticking very loud: Tlax: tlax: tlax: tlax:... Half past five" (327).

Chapter Eleven: Sunset

Marked by the narrator at the start of the chapter (329).

Chapter Twelve: 6 p.m. till shortly past seven

Marked by Geoffrey, "a clock pointing to six" (354) and the narrator, "The clock outside quickly chimed seven times" (387).

All of these time marks are lost in the movie. John Huston (the director) and Guy Gallo (the screenwriter) do not track time in any meaningful way. The opening shot of the volcano is overwritten with "November 1, 1938 The Day of the Dead." Aside from

Geoffrey's line about spring 1917 when he tells the submarine story, there is no other mention of time in the movie and no time marks by characters at all. The only way the viewer can tell that time is moving is by following the change of Yvonne and Geoffrey's clothes and by the gradual change from morning to afternoon to evening by tracking the light in the shots.

While time can be traced in the novel, doing so only serves to underscore the oddity of time within the text; time does not work within the novel. It becomes chronologically challenged, freezing at some points, disengaging from clock time at others. Chapter three marks the starting point of this time confusion when time stops for Geoffrey: "Vague images of grief and tragedy flickered in his mind. Somewhere a butterfly was flying out to sea: lost... In November, 1895, in convict dress, from two o'clock in the afternoon till half past, handcuffed, recognized, Oscar Wilde stood on the center platform at Clapham Junction..." (91) Time stops again early in chapter four for Hugh: "and then his heart and the world stopped too; the horse half over the hurdle, the driver, the guillotine, the hanged man falling, the murderer's bullet and the cannon's breath, in Spain or China frozen in midair, the wheel, the piston, poised – Yvonne, or something woven from the filaments of the past that looked like her, was working in the garden" (99).

Time slows down and disengages from clock time as well, almost as if the weight of the story presses down on the space/time fabric and creates a momentary expansion of time. The events that span chapters three, four, and five, illustrate how the expansion works. Geoffrey counts the time from Yvonne's arrival and his last drink as twenty-five minutes, "fully twenty-five minutes on end" (89) but story time counts it as at least an hour and a half. Counting what little story time clues there are, we realize that time has to have expanded in order for all the events that follow (Hugh and Yvonne's walk and horseback ride, the visit of Dr. Vigil, Geoffrey's drunken sleep, the conversation with Mr. Quincey, and Geoffrey's hallucinations) to have had the story time necessary to occur. This confusion of time is marked by Geoffrey who tells us that it is 10:45 a.m. by his watch (142) but then hears a clock tower chime twenty-three times (142) and later marks the time as 12:15 (148). A similar expansion of time occurs again in chapters six, seven, and

eight as all three characters manage to take a walk, visit Laurelle, and attend a fiesta before getting the bus to Tomalín. The bus ride to Tomalín, with all its portentous events, had to have been achieved in record time; as Hugh, Geoffrey, and Yvonne had sufficient time to catch the bus, linger over the dying Indian, watch the slow bull fight, swim, drink, and argue, all in roughly two and a half hours.

The fact that time does not count inside the story time world, as it does outside of it, is underscored by several moments in the text. First, the narrator comments on the time discordance of the town clock and his own watch, “The clock over the market arch, like the one in Rupert Brooke, said ten to three; but it was twenty to” (242). Second, the narrator, Geoffrey, and Laurelle each focus readers’ attention on the bus and train schedules. There are multiple confusions of when buses and trains arrive (Geoffrey reads the schedules and drunkenly wonders when he was to meet Lee Maitland, Laurelle counts time via the bus schedule, and the narrator constantly remarks on the movement of both the bus and train). This repeated focus draws attention to the fact that the trains and buses move via schedules, pre-established and printed on paper. The schedules create orderly grids that control movement and link disparate locations to one another in a matrix of time and space. Those grids fail in the novel; just as the town clocks and character watches are failing. Finally, in a sly slight of hand, readers get to read of Hugh’s encounter with Einstein, hammering home the importance of noting time and the pointlessness of doing so, “our orbits crossing, asks me the time? Is this Einstein, up for an honours degree? And who smiles when I say I don’t know... And yet asked me... who has upset the whole world’s notions of time and space ... And smiled again when I pointed out the clock neither of us had noticed” (191).

In a novel so obsessed with marking time and using time as one of its master symbols, the fact that the timeline does not work is of critical importance because it underscores the futility of trying to create a linear motion. Instead the book relies on a cross layering of time achieved through a continuous series of descriptive pauses, analepsis, and prolepsis. The descriptive pause serves to stop the time of the novel. The opening of the novel introduces readers to this effect; “Two mountain chains traverse the republic roughly

from north to south, forming between them a number of valleys and plateaus. Overlooking one of these valleys, which is dominated by two volcanoes, lies, six thousand feet above sea level, the town of Quauhnahuac” (3). The descriptive pause goes on for four paragraphs before the first action line of the story begins, “Towards sunset on the Day of the Dead in November, 1939, two men in white flannels sat on the main terrace of the Casino drinking anís” (4). The rest of the first chapter is inter-cut with repeating descriptive pauses as Laurelle walks slowly through the town, “traveling in an eccentric orbit round his house forever” (24). The effect is to make the story feel extremely languid in its pace. The first chapter also feels disorienting because so little development occurs and what movement is present is continually blocked by a series of multiple descriptive pauses and a looping series of analepsis, as Laurelle remembers events of his youth, of his first meeting Geoffrey, and his feelings for Yvonne.

While descriptive pauses are scattered through the entire novel, a second notable example of what they do to the reader’s perception of pace occurs in chapter nine. In the slow heat of day as the listless bullfight unfolds, Yvonne filters a series of descriptive pauses as we experience the bullfight, “It was a marvelous peanut wagon She could see its little donkey engine toiling away minutely inside, furiously grinding the peanuts. How delicious, how good, to feel oneself, in spite of all the strain and stress of the day, the journey, the bus, and now the crowd rickety grandstand, part of the brilliantly colored serape of existence, part of the sun, the smells, the laughter” (264-265).

As important as the descriptive pauses are in slowing down the movement of the story, the looping series of analepsis and prolepsis that invade each character’s consciousness do even more to disrupt reading order and create a languid and discursive pace. The discordance the analepsis and prolepsis build into the story also manipulates perceptions of character as each character is built through a series of pre and post story time revelations. Readers discover critical information about Hugh, Yvonne, and Geoffrey at different points of the story arc, which constantly forces a reevaluation and rebuilding of their characters as the story interweaves between one time point and the next. The

characters are filtered by other's memories and projections. As each character builds, they seem to have a critical analepsis and prolepsis.

Yvonne is filtered through multiple male points of view before we finally see her own reading of her past, via a series of analepsis that chart her early childhood; "Yvonne remembered little of the period save her mother's death. Yvonne was then six..." (269). By now, readers have learned of Yvonne through Geoffrey's letter in chapter one and the various reactions of the men in the novel. It is not until just before her death that readers get her internal thoughts, "poor Cliff! – one seldom thought of him now and one tried not to think of the self-righteous girl whose pride had been so outraged by his infidelities" (273). The prolepsis that dominates Yvonne's filtered view is that of the imaginary house and farm she conjures for herself and Geoffrey. This prolepsis occurs multiple times in the novel, with slight variations, until its undoing in chapter eleven. Upon her death, she sees the house burning, "But the house was on fire, she saw it now from the forest, from the steps above, she heard the crackling, it was on fire, everything was burning, the dream was burning, the house was burning, yet here they stood in an instant, Geoffrey and she, inside it, inside the house, wringing their hands" (349-350).

Geoffrey's character is less filtered by outside eyes and is revealed through his own drunken thoughts (although his early childhood and service on the submarine are told by Laurelle). As a character that filters and forms from a state of constant intoxication, any reliable view has to come from the rare moments of clarity he has about himself, however fleeting they may be, "but the mescal had brought him in touch with his situation again to the extent that he did not now need to comprehend any meaning in the words beyond their abject confirmation of his own lostness, his own fruitless selfish ruin, now perhaps finally self-imposed, his brain, before his cruelly disregarded evidence of what heartbreak he had caused her, at an agonized standstill" (360). In chapter twelve it is clear that time, which has been so muddled up to now in his life, has become apparent to him, "No, he thought; the words sank like stones in his mind. – It was a fact that he was losing touch with his situation... He was dissociated from himself, and at the same time he saw this plainly, the shock of receiving the letters having in a sense waked him, if only, so to say,

from one somnambulism into another; he was drunk, he was sober, he had a hangover; all at once...he seemed back in the early morning again” (358). That his character is completely bounded by time, a time that is constantly muddled and running out, is reinforced by the main analepsis of his story. It begins through his memory of the night in Mexico City when he could not find the restaurant he and Yvonne were going to have dinner, “ ‘Do you remember how the night before you left we actually made a date like a couple of strangers to meet for dinner in Mexico City?’ ... ‘You didn’t keep it.’ ... ‘That was because I couldn’t remember the name of the restaurant at the moment...I went into all the restaurants in the Via Dolorosa looking for you and not finding you I had a drink in each one...there I was wandering around from place to place, wrestling, and thinking all the while I could prevent you from going the next morning, if I could only find you!’” (92). The climatic prolepsis for Geoffrey comes in chapter twelve, “The Consul’s eyes focussed on a calendar behind the bed. He had reached his crisis at last, a crisis without possession, almost without pleasure finally, and what he saw might have been, no, he was sure it was, a picture of Canada. Under a brilliant full moon a stag stood by a river down which a man and a woman were paddling a birch bark canoe. This calendar was set to the future, for next month, December: where would he be then?” (366) Of course it is a futile prolepsis, for Geoffrey will not see the turn of the month, his future and any projections for it have run out.

Hugh directly filters his own character and is the least time bound agent in the novel. When he flashes back he tends to do so in large sections, revealing his character in a more consistent flow. For example, chapter six provides a great deal of his back story on board the *S.S. Philoctetes* and his ambitions to be a singer. His future is also more accurately mapped. The prolepsis in chapter four actually occurs (to the extent the story projects), “the *S.S. Noemijolea*, 6,000 tons, leaving Vera Cruz on the night of November 1-3-14(?), 1938, with antimony and coffee, bound for Freetown, British West Africa...she will proceed with the utmost caution into the Mediterranean Sea, leaving first Cape de Gata...still rolling, at Vallcarca, twenty miles south of Barcelona, she will discharge her cargo of T.N.T. for the hard-pressed Loyalists armies and then probably be blown to smithereens –“ (107-108). We can speculate that his ship was not blown to

smithereens, as we know from the start of the novel that Hugh is at least still alive and has forged a friendship with Laurelle, such that, “When Hugh left, it was as if he had lost a son” (8).

Beyond the effects of analepsis and prolepsis on the revelation of character, Lowry uses the techniques of flashing forwards and backwards to frame the entire story. It is through one line, “Over the town, in the dark tempestuous night, backwards revolved the luminous wheel-----” (44), that the master analepsis begins.

The movie, which fails to provide the sense that time is failing, that it freezes, or that it expands, also removes the strong presence of the novel’s analepsis and prolepsis. The conversations between Hugh and Yvonne about her intentions, Hugh’s line about going to join the RAF, and Geoffrey’s frequent allusions to the affair between Hugh and Yvonne all act as small moments of flash back and flash forward, but none of these match the sweeping and jolting time jumps of the novel. The closest the movie comes to representing the time structure of the book is the opening long shot of Geoffrey walking to the Red Cross party. It is a moment of pure descriptive pause. Like the opening scene in the novel, it is overly long and serves to delay the narrative, all the while it subtly supports its tone and themes.

Lowry builds into his structure of repeating descriptive pause, analepsis, and prolepsis, a parallel structure of cross layering. Events happen simultaneously and cross each other, as they are separated over spatial distance. While this occurs repeatedly (the buses and trains coming and going, the woman with the chicken playing dominoes in the bars, Yvonne’s letters disappearing and reappearing, the delivery of the postcard, the tennis game played by Vigil and Laurelle in 1938 and 1939, and a series of visits and phone calls), the critical cross layering event is the number seven horse. The horse that Geoffrey first sees in the morning, that Hugh and Yvonne then see during their ride, that the three of them see later on the bus ride to Tomalín, that appears again at the Farolito bar, that is spooked by the gun shots, and that kills Yvonne.

In effect, the horse is its own time mark, appearing again and again, manifesting the weft and weave of the spatial structure of the book, literarily acting out in chapter eleven:

“A sharp pistol-like report, from somewhere ahead, as of a back-firing car, broke this swaying stillness, followed by another and another (347) ... “The next moment attempting to rise she saw, by a brilliant flash of lighting, the riderless horse” (349).

events that take place in chapter twelve:

“The Chief fired twice more, the shots spaced, deliberate. Thunderclaps crashed on the mountains and then at hand. Released, the horse reared; tossing its head, its wheeled round and plunged neighing into the forest” (388-389).

These multiple cross layerings create a cyclical effect and introduce the central time symbol of the novel, the wheel. While 19th century writers such as Dickens and Austen created time structures that moved forward in time, Modernist writers such as Joyce (with *Finnegans Wake* in particular) and Lowry created circles of time in their works. Time does not move in a linear progression in their novels, but in an orbital revolution, back on itself, connecting in various ways.

There are many wheels in *Under the Volcano*, spread out over the text like the gridlines on a map. The major motif is the Ferris wheel that looms over the town in 1939 and sends the story reeling back to 1938. The Ferris wheel manifests itself again in the flywheel of the printing press Yvonne and Geoffrey pass as they walk back to their house early in the morning, in the máquina infernal Geoffrey rides at the fiesta, “the wheels” that newspaper men get rather than the shakes, the wheel of St. Catherine, the whirligig, “a little parody of the Great Carrousel” (221), the spiral staircase at Laruelle’s house, and the bicycle wheel and its “spoked shadow... enormous, insolent” (290).

There are other repetitive time symbols in the book as well, each standing for a continuous loop and each spread out over the text. There are the buses and trains that come and go, connecting one location and time to another, there is Yvonne's interest in the stars, that move in elliptical patterns and the associative connection to Mayan astrology and the month that lasts only days. There is the ruined palace of Maximilian and his lost civilization, the timelessness of the ocean and its pulling circle of tides, and then, there are the letters; Yvonne's letters, Hugh's missives, and Geoffrey's one note. Each, like the wheel, stands as a major symbol of time, but unlike the wheel and its suggestions of endless looping, the letters freeze time. Once sealed, a letter holds tight to its time, transporting it across other times, pulling with it threads of the past to be opened in the future. These threads help create the spatial texture that structures the novel.

The importance of letters begins in the first chapter as Laruelle reads a letter Geoffrey wrote to Yvonne. It is a good example of how time effects the reader and how Lowry plays with time, as it accomplishes multiple narrative goals. Its yearning and pain soak into the text, setting the mood of the novel. It is interesting that this is done, like the establishment of character explored earlier, through a conceit of time. It also marks an early displacement of time. Geoffrey's letter was never posted. This thwarts time, freezing it but not allowing it to travel forward. Readers also get to see how time is manipulated within the text as the whole letter is about time, "I have stood here, and in Mexico City, in the Compañía Telegráfica Mexicana, and in Oaxaca, trembling and sweltering in the post office and writing telegrams all afternoon, when I had drunk enough to steady my hand, without having sent one. And I once had some number of yours and actually called you long distance to Los Angeles through without success And another time..." 40. The letter also allows the narrator another chance to insert his own count of time into the novel, "(Several mescalitos later and dawn in the Farolito)" (42). Extending the work of this one missive, the letter also takes us out of Laruelle's time and into the time of the text. The radical difference between text time and reader time, that will continue in the rest of the novel, begins here. We are told the time it took Laruelle to read the letter, "In the last five minutes the scene within the cantina had wholly changed" (43), but we know that it actually takes approximately fifteen minutes of reader time to

read the six pages the letter spans. Finally, the fact that Laruelle burns the letter, eradicating time, is the last piece of symbolic inference Geoffrey's one letter manages before it is turned to ash.

Equally symbolic is the postcard Geoffrey receives as he, Yvonne, Hugh, and Laruelle walk toward Laruelle's home. During the walk the postman comes upon them, calling out, "There is a letter, a letter, a letter" (201), a postcard, "from Yvonne herself and apparently written at least a year ago" (202). On the card is an image of the Carlsbad Cavern Highway, "The road turned a little corner in the distance and vanished" (202). As a time image, the highway goes off into the distance, endless and unseen but it is captured in the photo, put on the post card that Yvonne uses to freeze that moment of time.

The final symbolic use of letters occurs in chapter twelve. Geoffrey, in the Farolito bar, finally is reunited with the packet of letters from Yvonne that he had lost, "*Where are the letters Geoffrey Firmin the letters the letters she wrote till her heart broke?*" (357). They have been left in this nightmare of a place, frozen in time and unread. Once he begins to read them, they start with a discordant time message, "Do you remember to-morrow?" (358) and end with a meditation on the harsh effects of inescapable time, " "You are walking on the edge of an abyss where I may not follow. I wake to a darkness in which I must follow myself endlessly, hating the I who so eternally pursues and confronts me. If we could rise from our misery, seek each other once more, and find again the solace of each other's lips and eyes. Who is to stand between them? Who can prevent?" " (361).

The movie uses some of the same wheel and letter imagery. While there is no luminous Ferris wheel, there is the infernal machine, a roller coaster, and a carousel, all spinning at different speeds in the shot. The letters run as a dancing line of connection between and among the movie's scenes. Geoffrey is looking for the letters in each bar he enters, Yvonne wonders aloud why he did not answer them, Hugh tells her Geoffrey has never read them, and at the end, Yvonne's words are narrated to us. While they are not the words of the text, so the odd time displacement is lost, they still set the tone of the final scene. The movie also uses lines of dialog to underscore the importance of time. Almost

all of the lines are delivered by Geoffrey, he drunkenly states that this will be the “age of the dead,” that it is “not the time but the heart,” and he yells “change, change” to the typewriter man. Geoffrey and Yvonne talk about the Mayan months. Geoffrey tells Yvonne and Hugh in the bathroom scene that there is “no past, only future” and he tells Hugh that “the past fills up quicker than we know.” In the pivotal scene before they separate and Geoffrey runs to the final bar, he and Yvonne exchange a series of lines about it not being too late. Finally, at the cusp of his death, Geoffrey tells his murderer that he has heard that the world goes round and round, and that he plans to wait where he is until his house comes to him and that he will go inside and lock the door.

Throughout the darkly sad plot of *Under the Volcano*, time, like the volcanoes themselves, haunts the characters: time passing, time missed, and time misplaced. While the Modernist idea of a closed circuit might suggest that there is more meaning to be found in time, since it is continuous and knowable in its orbit, the idea of a closed circle actually works to undermine meaning in *Under The Volcano*, as there is no possibility for escape and other chances. Treating time as a circle stops time’s greatest gift to narrative, the ability for possibility, the ability for change and chance.

Yvonne and Geoffrey are locked in a cycle of missed chances. Her letters go un-read and thus unanswered. His drinking never stops so moments of clarity are only fleeting and never stable long enough to be acted upon. Trapped in their mutual orbits there is no way off the Ferris wheel their lives have become. Hugh, so much less time bound than the others, can get off and change direction; he can get a boat bound elsewhere, his fate can be unknowable.

These two counter locking aspects of time, the fatality of a looped existence and the uncertainty of an unknown path, help support the existential nihilistic philosophy that is so heavily laden in the tone and message of *Under the Volcano*. Living his life in a constant Hell, Geoffrey’s time choices become moot. What does it matter if the train is early or late, if a letter is read or lost, if a conversation was real or hallucinated? Once the bells toll for him, “dolente...dolore!” (44) and he stands, as did Dante and Virgil on the

edge of Hell, looking into its circle, time ceases to matter. For Hugh, less restrained by the looping labyrinth of time and able to step off the path leading to a timeless Hell, time matters. Time becomes political and it is through that aspect that Lowry explores the politics of the novel and its concerns with revolutions and disruptions – which are in themselves, of course, two time-based constructions.

Playing with time and its consequences was not unique in the Modernist movement, James Joyce and Virginia Woolf had both already written masterpieces that froze and expanded time. Reading *Under the Volcano*, however from a time-based perspective, does allow the reader a contextualizing path into the novel that helps structure what otherwise is a disorienting experience. Lowry's focus and strong emphasis on method puts the narrative in peril however, making its form more fascinating than its story, its mode of telling more interesting than what is told.

The movie, which fails to grapple with the complexities of the space/time complications, offers only Lowry's tragic and dark assessment of the futility of life. As a viewer, I found the movie a dark and an invasive experience, without the fascinations of the novel's structure.

As for using time as a basis to read through a text, it raises some issues. Primarily it distances the analysis from layered meanings and might run the risk of creating an over-reading of what is there. Because it is its own prism, time tends to take over and swamp other more delicate symbols, recurrences, or lines of text. It orders a text so completely it may crowd out other ways to read. Certainly it puts an emphasis on events and plotting, and in a book like *Under the Volcano*, where the forward plot is so basic, it creates a reading that loses a great deal of tonal implications.

What a time analysis does very well however is create an underpinning to the text so that elements can be brought forward. I am not sure, without focusing so much on time, that it would be as readily apparent that character and mood are created through time structures. I think further explorations might also reveal that landscape is tied to time. If I were to

explore this novel differently in another paper, I would want to consider the landscapes of the novel, and how setting is of particular importance. In addition to the gardens and volcanoes, there is a great deal of attention paid to how the land is mapped through the text which is of interest in terms of the kind of inner and outer spaces it suggests. I also think an intertextual reading, a focus on hypotext, would be fascinating. In addition to the clear references to Dante, Melville and Conrad also haunt the novel, and a reading of how various texts are in conversation with *Under the Volcano* would be fascinating.

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