

Past and Present: Historical Views in Graham Swift's *Waterland*

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Abstract: The semi-autobiographical novel *Waterland* by twentieth-century British writer Graham Swift has been recognized as a popular work by British literary critics. Under the guidance of Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the literary chronotope, this paper analyses both the various types of chronotope in the novel as well as the author's historical view between different times and spaces through the dialogue.

Keywords: *Graham Swift, Waterland, Chronotope, Historical Inversion, Historical View*

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1 Introduction

In 1983, Graham Swift published his novel *Waterland*, which combines major historical events in order to describe the historical changes of small places. The novel has both the deconstruction of the grand narrative and the reflection of history and the past. Since its publication, researchers have studied and analysed the novel from different aspects such as ecology and Lacanian psychology. In her book, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*, Canadian literary critic Linda Hutcheon deliberates that *Waterland* is a historical meta-fiction. Since then, it has opened up a wave of analyses by many researchers from this perspective. Regarding the research areas of the novel, analysis that combines Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the literary chronotope with the author's historical view is indeed rare. Under the guidance of Bakhtin's theory of the literary chronotope, this paper analyses *Waterland* and identifies the different chronotopes that express the

author's views on history and the past in a dynamic way through dialogue.

2 Literary chronotope in the novel

From the perspective of literature and art, the definition of chronotope is strictly defined in Bakhtin's essay, "The *Bildungsroman* and Its Significance in the History of Realism": "We will give the name chronotope (literally, "time space") to the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature."^{[1]274}. Pan Yueqin details that "'chronotope' refers not to a specific time and space presented in the literary work, but to the inseparable interrelationship between them. It is a form in which time and space in a literary work adapt to each other. Therefore, it is a unified whole or, more specifically, a relatively stable model formed by the combination of time and space^[2]." In addition, Bakhtin also emphasized on the characteristics of chronotope: "What counts for us is the fact that it expresses the inseparability of space and time (time as the fourth dimension of space). We understand the chronotope as a formally constitutive category of literature; we will not deal with the chronotope in other areas of culture."^{[1]274}. Bakhtin believed that in time and space, "the sign of time is to be revealed in space, and space must be understood and measured by time"^{[1]275}. In the essay, Bakhtin uses chronotope as a measure to scrutinize the various forms of time and space in ancient Greek and Roman literature, and explains in detail the different relationships between time and space formed by different literary genres.

According to Swift, *Waterland* can be divided into three different time periods, namely Tom's maternal family history, Tom's first-person narrative of his youth life experiences and later career as a middle-

aged history teacher and, lastly, his marriage crisis. These three different time periods are divided into three chronotopes in order to distinguish their differences. In describing the history of his maternal family, Tom narrates collecting various types of information. His narration is from the perspective of an outsider, and this narrative form is consistent with Bakhtin's idea of the author's point of view. When analysing the ancient Roman novel, *The Golden Ass*, Bakhtin mentions that the protagonist of the novel, Lucius, was transformed into an ass and must observe his surrounding objects and describe the everyday world without participating himself. Additionally, in *The Golden Ass*, the "adventure time" and "everyday time" are combined into one, which is a typical characteristic of this chronotope. Similarly, in *Waterland*, when talking about the history of his maternal family, Tom describes their migration to the Fens in great detail, which constitutes the everyday time of this period. During this everyday time period, Tom begins to uncover the background of his brother Dick's life. Here, he discovers the adventure time formed by Dick's background, reflecting the typical feature of this chronotope, which is the fusion of adventure time and everyday time. The time of this type of chronotope can also be called the adventure-everyday time. The chronological narrative of Tom's youth describes Tom and Mary's love story, Dick and Mary's love story, Mary swimming with Tom and other friends by the river, the death of Tom's friend Freddie, Mary's abortion, Tom's search for the truth about Freddie's death and, lastly, the death of Dick. After a careful study of this series of events, it is found that the cause of all these events emanated from the love between Tom and Mary. After Tom and Mary fell in love, a riverside swim allowed Tom to realize that Dick also had feelings for Mary. Mary's sudden pregnancy provoked Dick's anger and, thinking that the unborn child was Freddie's, caused Freddie to be killed. Finally, through solving this case, Tom discovers the real truth behind Dick's birth. Based on this series of events, the love story between Tom and Mary constitutes the basis for the development of various experiences in Tom's youth. According to Bakhtin's theory of the literary chronotope, the time and space in the love story of Tom and Mary constitute a small chronotope, namely the chronotope of the threshold. Regarding this chronotope of the threshold, Bakhtin explained that the threshold space is the chronotope of crisis or life-turning event. This chronotope is often associated with sudden

changes in life, crisis and other plots: "In literature, the chronotope of the threshold is always metaphorical and symbolic, sometimes openly but more often implicitly." In the chronotope of the threshold, the biographical time is expressed as a moment, just as in Tom and Mary's love story in the novel. Compared with a series of events in Tom's entire childhood, their love story only comprise a matter of moments, though it plays a key role in the development of subsequent various events. In describing Tom's mid-life marriage and work crisis, the author used another chronotope, the salon (in the broad sense). In expounding this chronotope, Bakhtin explains: "From a narrative and compositional point of view, this is the place where encounters occur (no longer emphasizing their specifically random nature as did meetings 'on the road' or 'in an alien world')"^{[1]448}. In addition, Bakhtin indicated that the key feature of this chronotope is that "this is where dialogues happen, something that acquires extraordinary importance in the novel, revealing the character, 'ideas' and 'passions' of the heroes."^{[1]448}. Tom mainly talks about his middle-age life with the principal and students at the school. The different exchanges reflect the different attitudes of Tom (as a history teacher), his students and the principal towards history. Therefore, in the novel, Tom's middle-aged life constitutes a new chronotope, which is the salon.

In summary, when describing the three different time periods, three different chronotopes are formed due to the differences in each time and space. However, in the entire novel, these three different chronotopes are encompassed in a chronotope, which is the chronotope of the Platonic.

Upon analysing ancient Greek and Roman biographies and autobiographies, Bakhtin inferred that the first typical representative in classical Greek is the Platonic, in which the chronotope embodied is that "the life of such a seeker is broken down into precise and well-marked epochs or steps"^{[1]324}. In *Waterland*, Tom experiences mid-life crisis, firstly, as a husband when Mary was accused of abducting a baby in a supermarket. On the assumption that she has a mental problem, she is committed into a mental asylum. Secondly, as a teacher, the knowledge Tom teaches is not recognized by the students and the principal. Due to the serious problems Tom encounters in both his career and marriage, he is determined to identify the root of his problem. He becomes retrospective in order to search for answers; he explores a series of events

that happened in his childhood and even searches his maternal family history. Therefore, Tom's step-by-step exploration of the past becomes a process of seeking the truth and this process constitutes a new chronotope.

3 The meaning of various chronotopes in the novel

In "The *Bildungsroman* and Its Significance in the History of Realism," Bakhtin pointed out that chronotope has many meanings, the most obvious of which is the meaning and portrayal of the plot: "The plot entanglement is formed in the space-time body and is also solved in the space-time body."^{[1]451} In addition, Zhang Xiaofeng also said that "the chronotope is a world model called a unity, which links all the surrounding objects; the plot itself is developed by the chronotope"^[3]. In the plot describing the maternal family history, the author's grasp of time and space presents the chronotope created by the author of *The Golden Ass*. The purpose is not only to promote the development of the plot through the common role of time and space. More importantly, through the identity of Tom as an outsider, the history of the maternal family is objectively described, making the description of the maternal family extremely credible and objective. In describing the experiences of Tom's youth, the treatment of the relationship between time and space presents the characteristics of the chronotope of the threshold. Its purpose is to emphasize that the love story of Tom and Mary plays a major role in all subsequent events. Further, through his own research and reflection and by using this chronotope to express the crisis and turning points, the author's judgment in the text, in which Tom and Mary are caught in time, is integrated into the grand scheme of history. When describing Tom's mid-life crisis, the chronotope that is strongly illustrated by dialogue is the salon. Through a series of dialogue, different views of different characters in the novel are reflected and the three independent chronotopes are included in the Platonic. The biggest feature is the dialogue, through which the plots of three different chronotopes are developed in parallel and a series of events occur in three different time periods. It was eventually revealed that it was incest in Tom's maternal family that eventually led to Freddie's early death and Mary's abortion. Tom and Mary become burdened with guilt, and Mary's lifelong infertility is the root and ultimate cause of her own marital tragedy. More importantly, by telling his own

personal stories, such as his maternal family history and youth experiences, Tom's personal experience becomes concrete evidence to refute the current contempt he has for his students and principal. Only history can dispel the darkness of reality and explain one's confidence for the future because the answer has been found through retrospection.

4 Historical inversion and chronotope with dialogue

In *Waterland*, when it comes to the future, the school principal's future will definitely become better and more hopeful. However, in the past, he used alcohol to paralyze his fear of it, and even regards the home he built for his children as a "nuclear fallout shelter"^[4] that would prevent future disasters. The students are represented by the character named Price, who constantly argues with his history teacher, Tom, in the classroom, stating that the study of history and the past is unnecessary and that one should focus on the present and future. The behaviour of students seems to reflect confidence in the future and Price's establishment of the Holocaust Club serves to resist the students' fears and worries about the future. Regarding the attitudes of the students and the principal, Bakhtin pointed out that "another form of showing the same attitude toward the future is the doomsday theory. This is another way to take the time to focus on the future"^{[1]343}. Bakhtin pointed out that this is a form of historical inversion. Bakhtin defined historical inversion as "a thing that could and in fact must only be realized exclusively in the future is here portrayed as something out of the past, a thing that is in no sense part of the past's reality, but a thing that is in its essence a purpose, an obligation."^{[1]342}. Bakhtin believes that there are two types of historical inversion: one transfers what may happen in the future to the past, while the other fears the future and promotes the doomsday theory. The view of the principal and students is actually a denial of the future because they remove the true meaning of time in the context of the future. As Xiaohe stated, "The future here is based on the destruction of the entire material world. The future is seen as a miserable disaster, a re-chaos, and a re-emergence of God"^[5]. Concerning the students' attitude towards the future, Tom, as a history teacher, emphasizes that the only solution is to rely on the past and seek answers from it. As Bakhtin stated, "Only the present and the past have the power to confirm the actual reality"^{[1]342}. In addition, Tom takes himself as an

example to illustrate the importance of finding the past, just as Bakhtin stated, “If taken outside its relationship to past and future, the present loses its integrity, breaks down into isolated phenomena and objects, making of them a mere abstract conglomeration.”^{[1]341}.

According to Bakhtin’s theory of the literary chronotope, it is believed each text contains many large and small chronotopes. Some chronotopes are contained within other chronotopes and different types of chronotope interconnect, interact and exist in dialogue. In *Waterland*, there are different chronotopes—just as the chronotope in *The Golden Ass*—namely the chronotope of the threshold and the chronotope of the salon. These three different types of chronotope are represented in different time periods, which are finally included in the chronotope of the Platonic. In *Waterland*, Swift connects three different chronotopes. In the process of paralleling the three chronotopes, firstly, Tom gradually discovers the causes of his mid-life and marriage crisis. Secondly, he tells his students about the importance of the past using his own life experiences. The entire process leads to Tom discovering the answer to his current predicaments and also shows the process of his constant transformation. The moment he finds the answer marks the end of his metamorphosis. The significance of time and space is not only to promote the development of the plot and to build a platform for the story in *Waterland* but, more importantly, to conduct dialogue through the different chronotopes and clearly point out the prejudice against the past by the principal and students. In the novel, the grasp of time uses historical inversion to make it clear that the principal and students are unfairly prejudiced against the past and that even though they exhibit utmost confidence for the future, they are actually deeply fearful of it. Using chronotope and historical inversion, Swift reflects the confusion and fear of the principal and students about the past and the future. It is precisely because they are highly prejudiced against the past and fearful of the future that they suffer from panic and helplessness.

In this paper, the researcher uses the different types of chronotope to discuss this feature, concluding that only the past can guide the present and the future. Additionally, only the past can dispel the darkness of reality, indicating that the direction in which the principal and students must seek guidance is by relying on the past. The importance of this is reflected in the novel’s own view of history.

5 Summary

Based on Bakhtin’s theory of the literary chronotope, this paper analyses the four types of chronotope composed in *Waterland* in order to distinguish the different times and spaces in the novel. Through these four different types of chronotope, the development of the novel’s plot is promoted and, according to Bakhtin’s historical inversion, the students and principal are found to exhibit fear and confusion caused by disregarding the past. Finally, in the chronotope of the salon, through the dynamic dialogue between Tom, as a history teacher, and his students, not only is the reason for Tom’s current predicaments uncovered but also, more importantly, the author’s own historical view of the past and the present is clearly indicated through personal experience. Although the future appears closer in contact, the past remains as a significant guide for the present and the future.

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