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KRONOS AMORPHOUS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL READING OF JOHN GREEN'S
NOVEL *THE FAULT IN OUR STARS*

Harry C Joseph

Online English Tutor for International Students

E-mail:- harrycheeramkunnel@gmail.com



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ABSTRACT

The paper entitled "Kronos Amorphous: A phenomenological reading of John Green's novel *The Fault in our Stars* takes into consideration how 'time' is more phenomenological than cosmological for Gus and Hazel, since their life is defined by the frequent encounters with a disease that engulfed them almost fully. The chapter analyses this subjective experience of time wherein 'death' presents itself to be the reference point which attributes meaning and a sense of life. For Hazel and Gus, like other cancer kids, it is their proximity to death that marks the days and years of life. Their peculiar state of existence makes them less compliant with the 'clock-time'. Time is no longer the passing of hours. It is a constant movement through memory, action and expectation. They thus construct a narrative of their own life.

Keywords: Time, Phenomenology, Subjective Experiences

Introduction

The shift from realism to modernism is marked by the shift from the perception of time as a collection of instants in sequence to time as duration. In the industrial chronology, time is spatialised as instants measurable by the clock. But Bergson contradicted this and formulated the idea of *durée* as the true experience of time. "Bergson rhapsodized on the effects of pure memory which in his view originated in the nonmaterial realm of consciousness and its *durée*" (Nalbantian 10). Martin Heidegger paved the road trod on by the existentialists with the publication of *Being and Time* (1927), inaugurating the age of Phenomenology. He drew his ideas from the existentialism of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche as well as the ancients. He reformulated the most basic concepts underlying our thinking about ourselves, emphasizing the "sense of being" (*dasein*) over other interpretations of conscious existence, arguing that specific and concrete ideas form the bases of our perceptions and provides an ontological turn to the notion of time based on the '*dasein*.' For him, time holds meaning only as it is experienced in our everyday activities. Time as a mere concept is not meaningful.

Bergson's theory of time stressed the subjectivity and relativity of time within a philosophical mould, anticipating Einstein's space-time in physics by about 16 years. Einstein's setting of time in relation to the observer and his motion in space and Bergson's stress on subjectivity are seen as identical. Both their ideas amounted to the rejection of absolute universal time. Einstein's theory meant that "each observer would have his own measure of time as recorded by a clock that he carried: clocks carried by different observers would not

necessarily agree. Thus time became a more personal concept, relative to the observer who measured it" (Hawking 151).

The chapter analyses this subjective experience of time wherein 'death' presents itself to be the reference point which attributes meaning and a sense of life. For Hazel and Gus, like other cancer kids, it is their proximity to death that marks the days and years of life. Their peculiar state of existence makes them less compliant with the 'clock-time'. Time is no longer the passing of hours. It is a constant movement through memory, action and expectation. They thus construct a narrative of their own life.

Death- The Reliable Reality

The all engulfing nature of time which is very much akin to death is presented at the very outset in the prologue:

As the tide washed in, the Dutch Tulip Man faced the ocean: "conjoiner rejoinder poisoner concealer revelator. Look at it, rising up and rising down, taking everything with it."

"What's that?" I asked

"Water," the Dutchman said. "well, and time."

-Peter Van Houten, *An Imperial Affliction* (Green p. Prologue)

The very idea is further reinforced when Hazel considers everything as a side effect of dying. She says "Depression is a side effect of dying. Cancer is a side effect of dying. Almost everything is, really" (Green 1).

A person's identity is represented by his or her relations with time and space. When it comes to the life of these kids, the disease that 'devoured' them is so ingrained into their selves that they cannot exclude its overwhelming presence and hence very much a part of their identity. Each of the members of the support group while introducing themselves mentioned their "Name. Age. Diagnosis" (Green, 2012, p. 5). It is said that the Support Group "featured a rotating cast of characters in various states of tumor-driven unwellness" (Green 142). The group is rotating, as with the passage of time some of them were forced into a state of 'voluntary retirement.'

The very idea of 'living one's best life today,' which is addressed as *carpe dieum* in the writings of Horace, is very much intimate with the immanent and inevitable death encircling the life of a cancer patient. Issac, a friend to both Hazel and Gus is awaiting a surgery in ten days. So, after the Support Group he rushes out to meet his girlfriend telling "I should go. Monica is waiting for me. I gotta look at her a lot while I can" (Green 16).

Now, the chief concern is what could be termed as 'events' in the life of these teenagers. Unlike the busy life of people teeming with a whole lot of queries and worries, these unfortunate ones are most often silent witnesses to their own despicable predicament. Quiet often they simply forget the fact that they are alive, being sucked into a state of comma or 'oblivion.' This is very well explicated in the conversation between Hazel and her nurse Alison

"So you've been gone a couple days. Hmm, what'd you miss...A celebrity did drugs. Politicians disagreed. A different celebrity wore a bikini that revealed a bodily imperfection. A team won a sporting event, but another team lost. You can't go disappearing on everybody like this, Hazel. You miss too much." (Green 107)

What Alison gives is a pretty good account of the daily happenings of a 'clock regulated world.' In a way it exposes the boredom and pettiness of existence. The narrated incidents are cyclic and goes on endless repetitions. Possibly the only change is with the person and place. Hence the history of humanity is the same.

However when it is with the life of people like Hazel, the story is different. Their 'sense of time' is radically different from what one reads in a daily newspaper. They most often lose the uninterrupted flow of life. What they are left with is some 'excruciating moments of pain.'

Time-Space Parallel

We have already seen that time is allied to space in the common man's perception and articulation. According to Oswald Spengler, time consciousness is something that distinguishes the civilized man from the primitive man. He observes:

For the primitive man the word 'time' can have no meaning. He simply lives, without any necessity of specifying an opposition to something else. He has time, but he knows nothing of it. All of us are conscious, as being aware, of space only, and not of time. Space "is", (i.e. exists in and with our sense-world) – as a self-extension while we are living the ordinary life of dream, impulse, intuition and conduct, and as space in the strict sense in the moments of strained attention. 'Time,' on the contrary, is a discovery, which is only made by thinking. We create it as an idea or notion and do not begin till much later to suspect that we ourselves are Time, inasmuch as we live. And only the higher cultures, whose world-conceptions have reached the mechanical-Nature stage, are capable of deriving from their consciousness of a well-ordered measurable and comprehensible spatial, the projected image of time, the phantom time, which satisfies their need of comprehending, measuring and causally ordering all. (Osborne 122)

In other words, it is possible to imagine a stage in human civilization when men lived blissfully unconcerned or unaware of the 'onslaught of time' like the civilized man did. The primitive man did not hear the winged chariot drawing near, nor did he (possibly) dream of the deserts of eternity! It is this burden of civilisation that threatens the hapless beings like Hazel and Gus. Here lies the conflict between cosmological and phenomenological time.

Kronos (or Chronos) and Kairos are two Greek words that refer to two levels of time experience which can be considered basic to the human condition. They refer to two mythical conceptions relating to time. Kronos is the mythological god represented as an old man. This god symbolises the sequential or linear time. Kronos was objective time quantified or measured by the seconds, minutes and hours, "of simple chronicity, of the emptiness of *tock-tick*, humanly uninteresting successiveness" (Kermode 46) of days and years. Modern life is especially regulated by this type of time, so much so that we speak often about the 'tyranny of time' or the 'race against time' etc.

Kairos was represented as the son of Kronos and was imagined as the Greek god of opportunity. He symbolises the qualitative, deeply subjective and immeasurable aspect of time. Kairos is the 'now time' that flows uninterruptedly, and allows the human to flow with it. It is the perfect time or seasonal time. Kairos is what lends meaning and significance to the endless flux of unmarked Kronos. "It is required to be a significant season, *kairos* poised between beginning and end," "between the tick and the tock" (Kermode 46). In Christian theology *kairos* signifies the time of salvation. The relationship between time and place is indeed intricate. Time is presented "as motion or flow and place as a pause in the temporal current; attachment to place as a function of time, captured in the phrase, 'it takes time to know a place'; and place as time made visible, or place as memorial of times past" (Tuan 179).

Time and space are devoid of meaning without a human consciousness perceiving it. It is human consciousness that turns Kronos into Kairos and space into place. Kronos may turn to Kairos by a kind of 'humanising' or poetic process. In the same way space, which is characterized by extension is turned into a 'place' by a perceiving human consciousness. Space becomes 'place' when it is given a local habitation and a name. "... Space acquires emotional and even rational sense by a kind of poetic process," observes Edward Said, "whereby the vacant or anonymous reaches of distance are converted into meaning for us here. The same process occurs when we deal with time. Much of what we associate with or even know about such periods as 'long ago' or 'the beginning' or 'at the end of time' is poetic - made up" (Said 55).

Whether this time has a beginning or end is a matter of debate among philosophers, each of them bringing in different speculative hypothesis. The very same issue affects Hazel first and later Gus after reading

the fictional book, *An Imperial Affliction* by Peter Van Houten. The book ends “right in the middle of a” (Green 49) sentence. She speaks of this abrupt ending thus:

I know it’s a very literary decision and everything and probably part of the reason I love the book so much, but there is something to recommend a story that ends. And if it can’t end then it should at least continue into perpetuity...I understood the story ended because Anna died or got too sick to write and this midsentence thing was supposed to reflect how life really ends and whatever, but there were characters other than Anna in the story, and it seemed unfair that I would never find out what happened to them. (Green 50)

This problem of characters other than oneself is what hurts both Hazel and Gus. When one day they cease to exist, it is how the other characters would take up the issue that troubles them. Also there is this question of eternal oblivion or perpetual remembrance.

Throughout the novel there is the use of the technique of prolepses. They give the reader glimpses into the future. This device may be a spoiler of suspense as to ‘what happened’ but it surely increases the anticipation raising the question of why and how.

Mark Currie identifies three types of prolepses which he calls 1.Narratological 2. Structural and 3. Rhetorical (Currie 30 – 31). Of these the first two are what apply to the novel. Narratological prolepsis is “a form of anticipation which takes place within the time locus of the narrated. It is the anticipation of, or flash forward to, future events within the universe of narrated events” (Green 30). The second one, namely structural prolepsis is described as “a form of anticipation which takes place between the time locus of the narrated and the time locus of the narrator. It is among other things, the relation between narrated time, and the time of narration which is inherent in the preterite sense of classical narration” (Green 30). The third type is “a form of anticipation which takes place between the time locus of the narrator and the time locus of the reader” (Green 31).

In the classic tradition, a method that the early novelists also followed, the ‘argument’ or summary given at the beginning of each section of the narrative is a method of prolepsis. Prophecy as in the case of the witches’ meeting with Macbeth or Father Mapple’s Sermon and the prophecies of the mysterious Parsee Fedalla in Melville’s *Moby Dick* serve as examples of this kind of prolepsis.

Foreshadowing or prefiguration is a covert form of prolepsis. The narrator/ author would give direct or indirect hints about the future events. This is sometimes worked out through indirect statements in the case of authorial narratives or suggested through foreshadowing incidents or images which bear symbolic import. Flaubert used this in his *Madam Bovary*. The death of Charles Bovary’s first wife Heloise in the opening part following her financial disaster looks forward to the death of Emma towards the end of the novel. Similarly in the first chapter of Thomas Mann’s *Death in Venice*, Achenbach’s chance encounter with the stranger in front of the funeral chapel in Munich foreshadows two similar encounters later in the story, symbolizing the protagonist’s moral and physical decline and impending death.

In the novel, *The Fault in Our Stars*, prolepses is rather used as a tool which foresees death. Death is the anticipated future. How far and how long is the only matter, yet to be decided. Gus arranges an eulogy speech for him at the Sacred Heart church from Hazel and Issac. There he remains a witness to his own dramatic obituary service. He was very much pleased by it as he says: “Awesome, I’m hopeful I’ll get to attend as a ghost” (Green 257).

Another instance is the ‘spoiler alerts’ in the novel *The Price of Dawn*, a fictional novel suggested by Gus to Hazel. The story is all about the exploits of Sergeant Max Mayhem. At one point he was brutally wounded bearing seventeen bullets. Death was almost decided. But then there is this spoiler alert that “Colonel Mayhem lives” (Green 47). Though there is a missing element of suspense such prolepses in a way give a ray of hope for these dying teenagers.

However it is not always optimistic. Hazel wrote to Van Houten with the hope that she would be able to unveil the mysteries surrounding Anna’s life. The reader gets an impression that their Amsterdam journey

would reveal the same. But the 'author' Hazel encounters at Amsterdam is beyond her expectations- a drunkard, who is a heartless human being. Once she thought that the writer is the only one who could understand her, even better than her parents. So the prolepses could be misleading as well.

Conclusion

A creative account of the impending death is the great story of evolution behind their physical ailment. Cancer is a disease formed by the mutation of genes. It is this mutation that helped human beings in acquiring a seemingly sophisticated physical form and mental framework. Hence without this grand process of mutation we could never be on this planet. As an answer to Hazel's queries, Houten says "*omnis cellula e cellula*" (Green 276), which meant all cells come from cells. Thus it is from the same root that everything assumes grandeur.

At Amsterdam, Van Houten speaks about Zeno, the philosopher and his tortoise paradox. He sheds light on the minute variations existing even when one assumes there is none. It is particularly important in the life of Hazel and Gus as for them each fraction of their life is significant however small it might be. Hazel makes it clear thus:

"There are infinite numbers between 0 and 1. There's .1 and .12 and .112 and an infinite collection of others. Of course, there is a bigger infinite set of numbers between 0 and 2, or between 0 and a million. Some infinities are bigger than other infinities....I want more numbers than I'm likely to get, and God, I want more numbers for Augustus Waters than he got. But, Gus, my love, I cannot tell you how thankful I am for our little infinity. I wouldn't trade it for the world. You gave me a forever within the numbered days, and I am grateful." (Green 260)

This clearly depicts how time is conceived differently by the two. It is not the unending number that matters. What is important is how they made the best out of it, living their best life each day. Again, it is an account of the highly subjective experience of time which is different from the speculative numerical calculations.

Albert Einstein demonstrated in his theory that, when two observers are in relative motion, they will necessarily arrange events in a somewhat different time sequence. As a result, events that are simultaneous in one observer's time frame will not be simultaneous in some other observer's time frame. In the theory of relativity, the intuitive notion of time as an independent entity is replaced by the concept that space and time are intertwined and inseparable aspects of a four-dimensional universe, which is given the name "space-time" or the "space-time continuum".

What the chapter attempts is a revaluation of 'time' in the life of Hazel and Gus. The attention is upon the subjective experience of time as against the cosmological understanding. Also any reference to time is an obvious reflection on death. In a way it is 'death' that takes the role of the 'wall clock' in the life of Gus and Hazel.

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