

Chronotopic shaping  
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Mikhail Bakhtin, in his essay “Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel,” argues that the “chronotope” of a literary work – the configuration of time and space in the fictional world that the text projects – is inextricably connected with its characters: “the image of man in literature... is always intrinsically chronotopic.” (Bakhtin, 85). In this paper I will apply his theory to two radically different texts that deal with time travel: H. G. Wells’ *The Time Machine* and Octavia Butler’s *Kindred*.

H. G. Wells’ *The Time Machine* contains three different chronotopes: the chronotope of the novella’s frame narrative, the chronotope of the future world of 802, 701, and the chronotope of the post-apocalyptic world. The chronotope of the frame narrative is the time travel chronotope, in which temporality and spatiality fuse together: time becomes “a fourth dimension of Space” (Wells, 8), and therefore it is a nexus in which both time and space are isotropic. A corollary of this unified space-time continuum is predestination, because the ability to travel through time presupposes a fixed history, in order to avoid various logical paradoxes, such as the grandfather paradox. Hence, the free will of the characters situated in the fictional world constructed around this chronotope is of no ontological consequence; they are powerless to change their reality or shape their future. I suggest that the predestination governing this fictional world is precisely the cause of the characters’ lack of psychological depth: they are all stock characters, most of them named only after their profession and conforming to their professional stereotype – the Medical Man is skeptical, the Editor is nosy and eager for a scoop, the Psychologist listens attentively and feigns understanding and the Time Traveler is eccentric and fervent, as

any archetypical “ mad scientist”. Their inherent flatness is the structural result of the time travel chronotope: complex characters with a rich background, personal desires, passions, thoughts and quirks are ill-fit for a world upon which they have no impact.

The chronotope of the future world of 802, 701 is the evolution chronotope. This future world is the end result of environmental changes brought about by upper class humans, which led in turn to the division of the human race into two distinct species, one decadent and the other animalistic, due to the mechanism of natural selection, which prevents the preservation of traits that are no longer necessary for the survival of a species, like intellect in the case of the future humans. Natural selection, as delineated by Charles Darwin, links events together by contingency rather than design, because it is based on random changes in environment. It may be argued, however, that natural selection does not negate determinism, since it is possible that a force beyond nature governs environmental alterations that seem random. Nonetheless, the implied author of the narrative remains faithful to the Darwinistic paradigm and constructs the timeline of this fictional world as mutable, as is evident in the Time Traveler’s behavior: he acts as if he has free will and his actions have consequences. Moreover, he blames the human race for its own deterioration – “ I grieved to think how brief the dream of the human intellect had been. It had committed suicide.” (85) – thereby preassuming that the humans responsible for the situation could have acted differently. Thus, from the implied author’s ontological point of view, the fictional world of the embedded narrative is governed by contingency. Accordingly, its chronotope is the intersection of unbounded

space and linear time, with a mutable timeline, bounded only by the Time Traveler's quest for the Time Machine: the moment he recovers it, the Time Traveler leaves this world and the discourse time of this narrative comes to an end.

The evolution chronotope shapes characters differently from the way they were molded by the time travel chronotope. The Time Traveler is no longer an archetypal mad scientist, but rather a complex man who struggles to survive in a dangerous world. We are given a much deeper insight into his emotions and frailties: at the outset we see him losing control - " I remember running violently... beating the bushes with my clenched fists... laying hands upon them and shaking them up together." (40) - later on he wastes his precious matches on amusing the Eloi, and towards the end of his journey he accidentally burns down an entire forest. However, the Time Traveler's psychological complexity manifests itself most clearly in his attitude towards Weena: he states that " she was exactly like a child" (48), and yet flirts with her - " she kissed my hands. I did the same to hers." (48); he complains that that he " had as much trouble as comfort from her devotion" (48), but immediately qualifies the complaint - " Nevertheless she was, somehow, a very great comfort" (48); finally he feels " the intensest wretchedness for the horrible death of little Weena" (84), but asserts that " she always seemed to me, I fancy, more human than she was, perhaps because her affection was so human." (70). In this context it is interesting to note that the Time Traveler perceives affection as an inherently human trait, because none of the characters in the frame narrative evince affection, although they are all "

human” in the usual sense of the world. Furthermore, the Time Traveler himself expresses affection only towards Weena.

To recapitulate, the Time Traveler’s shift from a world constructed around the time travel chronotope, to a world unified by the evolution chronotope, brings about his transformation from a flat character to a round one, who expresses the range of irrational behavior and conflicting thoughts and emotions that is the hallmark of psychological depth. We may therefore surmise that in this novella complexity of character is only rendered possible in a fictional world that entails temporal fluidity. Furthermore, time in the future world of 802, 701 leaves its marks on the Time Traveler - “ His coat was dusty and dirty... his face was ghastly pale... his expression was haggard and drawn, as by intense suffering” (17) - whereas time in the fictional world of the frame narrative does not seem to alter the characters physically or mentally. This contrast is another corollary of the difference between the chronotopes of the two worlds.

It may also be worth mentioning the third chronotope of the novella, which lies at the core of the post-apocalyptic fictional world. In this chronotope space is boundless, whereas time is both boundless and static at the same time. On the one hand, temporality is a dimension in this world, because otherwise there could be no movement within it. On the other hand, the life of this world is almost completely extinct - the sun is dying, civilization is long gone, and the only creature remaining is “ a round thing... black against the weltering blood-red water” (93) - and without life time is in many aspects meaningless. Be that as it may, the chronotope of the post-apocalyptic world

has little opportunity to influence the Time Traveler, since he quickly flees in “horror of this great darkness” (92).

The difference between the shaping of fictional characters by the time travel chronotope to their shaping by the evolution chronotope may also offer a solution to one of the central mysteries of the text: why does the Time Traveler decide to undertake another journey in time, despite the fact that he narrowly escaped unscathed the first time? Ostensibly, he journeys in search of more tangible proof of his travels. However, the Time Traveler ipso facto cannot bring back proof substantial enough to make people believe him, because then in all probability the future he describes would be averted due to precautions taken in his present time, and if the future he describes no longer exists, then it is not possible that he traveled into this future, thereby creating a logical paradox. The Time Traveler, as a scientist, is probably aware of this paradox. Therefore, I suggest that he undertakes a second journey in time because he desires to enter, once again, a world structured around a chronotope that, to the extent of his knowledge, does not dictate a fixed timeline. He is well aware that the future of his own world is fixed, but by traveling to a world in which, from his limited point of view, the future may be open, the Time Traveler believes that he is once again assuming control over his life and mastering his fate. Perhaps that is why “he has never returned” (99).

Octavia E. Butler’s *Kindred* contains two chronotopes. The first chronotope, like that of *The Time Machine*’s frame narrative, is the time travel chronotope. In order to distinguish it from *The Time Machine*’s chronotope, I will henceforth call it the “modern chronotope”, since it predominantly deals <https://assignbuster.com/chronotopic-shaping-and-reshaping-in-hg-wells-the-time-machine-and-octavia-e-butlers-kindred/>

with space and time in the twentieth century. The temporal movement enabled by the modern chronotope is far more limited than that which is enabled by the Time Machine's time travel chronotope. Dana, the narrator and protagonist, can travel through a vast stretch of time and space within a few moments, but this travel is restricted to shifts between her new house in Altadena, California, in the time span of a few weeks between the 9th of June to the 4th of July 1976, and Rufus Weylin's immediate surroundings in Maryland, during Rufus' lifetime between the 1830s to the 1850s. It is important to note two things about this chronotope, concerning the instances in which Dana is not time traveling. First, on the diegetic level temporality is linear: the narrative moves forward in time from Dana's birthday to an unknown instance - "as soon as my arm was well enough" (262) - after the time travel has come to an end. On the extradiegetic level there are a few external analepses and one internal prolepsis (the loss of Dana's arm), but these anachronisms are irrelevant to the discussion of the chronotope, because if we were to reconstruct the story from the narrative discourse, these events would be part of a linear timeline. Second, with the exception of the narrative anachronisms aforementioned, space is bounded to Dana's home, precisely because of her abnormal spatial-temporal movement: "I was still afraid to leave the house... Driving, I could easily kill myself, and the car would kill other people if Rufus called me from it at the wrong time. Walking, I could get dizzy and fall while crossing the street." (116). Thus, the modern chronotope is an intersection of limited isotropic time and bounded space. However, despite the logical paradoxes of time travel, this chronotope does not create a fictional world governed by predestination. There are no textual indications that the actions of the

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fictional characters lack ontological consequences, thereby reducing them to the level of pawns of a fixed future. Quite the contrary, Dana is portrayed as an especially independent and free thinking young woman, who talks back to her boss, decides to be a writer despite the objections of her aunt and uncle, marries the man she loves regardless of racial difference and family disapproval, and stands her ground when her husband attempts to force her into activities she detests, such as typing. Thus, although the implied author is clearly aware of time travel paradoxes, as she articulates through the Dana's musings regarding Rufus – " His life could not depend on the actions of his unconceived descendant. No matter what I did, he would survive to father Hagar, or I could not exist. That made sense." (29) – she nonetheless creates an impossible world that contains both isotropic time and freedom of will and action. This impossibility can be pardoned, because time travel in *Kindred* is used to defamiliarize the past, by depicting it through the eyes of a homodiegetic narrator who has much more in common with the implied reader than she does with the average African American slave. The narrative thus recreates the horrors of slavery in a way which is intended to shock an audience already benumbed by innumerable slave narratives and documentaries. However, this affect is predicated on Dana's depth and complexity, and therefore it is crucial that she be free to make her own choices on an ontological level, in at least one of the fictional worlds of the novel. Hence, the modern chronotope of confined space and restricted multidirectional time, coupled with ontological freedom, shape the characters as free beings who are constantly struggling with the oppressive forces pitted against them. Dana and Kevin, her husband, do not wait resignedly for her sudden abductions into the past, but exert every effort in <https://assignbuster.com/chronotopic-shaping-and-reshaping-in-hg-wells-the-time-machine-and-octavia-e-butlers-kindred/>



order to increase her chances of survival: Kevin furnishes Dana with a weapon - " On the side of me was a canvas tote bag containing... the biggest switch knife I had ever seen" (45) - searches the local library, and even travels with her to the past, and Dana supplies herself with medication and a map of Maryland, and calls for help when she realizes that she cannot do her own shopping.

The second chronotope of the novel is the slavery chronotope, in which space is bounded to the Weylin slave plantation, and time is linear - the narrative moves forward in time from Rufus' early childhood to his death - and fragmented: the world is depicted in discontinuous sections of time, which are delimited at their start by a moment in which Rufus feels that his life is in danger, and at their end by a moment in which Dana feels her life is threatened. This fractured time creates fractured characters, because both the narrator and the reader have access to them only in isolated stages of their lives, with substantial gaps in between. Dana first meets Margaret Weylin, for example, when she is a young overprotective mother who beats her child's savior. Dana meets her a second time four years later, and she is still overprotective, fiercely jealous and vindictive. However, when Dana meets her for the third and last time, Margaret is eleven years older and profoundly changed: vulnerable, weak, and pathetic. Both Dana and the reader find it difficult to accept Margaret's change, because for Dana only a few months have passed (including both the time she spent in the past and that which she spent in the present), and for the reader only a single chapter separates between Dana's previous meeting with Margaret and the current one. Thus, we see here an example of how science fiction projects narrative

techniques from the extradiegetic level to the diegetic one – narrative ellipses become actual ellipses in the fictional world’s timeline – which create an affinity between Dana’s experience of time travel and the reader’s reading experience. This in turn brings about the deconstruction of the fictional characters as unified entities that change gradually over time. All the characters in this world, with the exception of Dana and Kevin, are incomplete, and as much as Dana loves Carrie, hates Tom Weylin, and pities Alice Greenwood, her perception of them is discontinuous, and she can never relate to them as fully as they relate to one another.

The slavery chronotope leads us once again to the issue of predestination. This issue manifests itself on two levels. On one level, the question of whether the fictional world’s timeline is fixed or mutable must remain ambiguous, in order for the narrative to retain its credibility and poignancy. If the fictional world were clearly deterministic, the preservation of Dana’s ancestry would be assured and she would probably abandon Rufus to his death, thereby bringing the story to an abrupt end. Yet if the fictional world were overtly subject to change, then the narrative would lose its raw power of depicting Dana’s attempts to instill Rufus with modern moral values and to alleviate the suffering of the plantation slaves as “ gambling against history” (83), a struggle doomed to failure. By the end of the narrative it is still unclear if the fictional world’s timeline is fixed, in which case Dana has no choice but to rescue her ancestor, or rather if it is open, in which case she indeed saves her lineage and herself through her endurance and resourcefulness. This ambiguity is heightened by the absence of any mention of Dana in the newspaper reporting Rufus’ death – “ I could find nothing in

the incomplete newspaper records to suggest that he had been murdered,” (263) – thereby suggesting that his demise was predetermined, and it is of little consequence that Dana was the agent of death. On the second level, the novel deals extensively with the notion of socio-historical determinism: “how easily slaves are made” (177). It explores how the slavery chronotope inevitably engenders slaves and slave owners. In other words, the issue at stake on this level is not determinism resulting from logical paradoxes, but rather the extent in which human behavior is controlled by spatiality and temporality (chronotope). This issue is dramatized through the process in which the slavery chronotope inexorably destabilizes the identities of Dana and Kevin, as they are shaped by the modern chronotope – as liberal thinkers, modern writers, and open-minded, affectionate lovers – and reshapes them respectively as a slave and a slave owner who becomes an abolitionist. In this context, it is most telling that Dana’s black skin color is only mentioned on her second journey to the past, three chapters into the novel, when Rufus states that his mother called her “just some nigger” (24). It is almost as if she was a white woman in the fictional world structured around the modern chronotope, and it is the slavery chronotope that has suddenly blackened her. At this stage she is still secure enough in her modern identity to return a rebuke: “I’m a black woman, Rufe. If you have to call me something other than my name, that’s it.” (25). However, her attitude towards Rufus’ derogatory language changes in her next journey, when Kevin wishes to chastise him for exclaiming that “Niggers can’t marry white people!” (60), but she lays “a hand on Kevin’s arm just in time to stop him from saying whatever he would have said.” (60-1). In the same journey Dana attempts to assert their otherness – “we weren’t really in. We were <https://assignbuster.com/chronotopic-shaping-and-reshaping-in-hg-wells-the-time-machine-and-octavia-e-butlers-kindred/>

observers watching a show... poor actors. We never really got into our roles.” (98) - but her words carry a degree of self deception, since shortly beforehand she felt vaguely ashamed when Tom Weylin caught her leaving Kevin’s bedroom - “ I felt almost as though I really was doing something shameful, happily playing whore for my supposed owner.” (97) - thereby betraying that the slavery chronotope has already begun to reshape her identity. Even her attempt to teach Nigel to read and write is a typical act of a rebellious slave, not of a modern woman. Kevin’s identity is similarly reshaped, as we may see in his declaration that nineteenth century America ““ could be a great time to live in,”” (97). His abolitionist activities mentioned later on in the narrative are once again characteristic of a nineteenth century enlightened white man, not of a young liberal in 1976 California. Thus, by the end of this journey Dana is ready to admit that “ now and then... I can’t maintain the distance. I’m drawn all the way into eighteen nineteen” (101). Dana’s next journey to the past marks a further step in the slavery chronotope’s reshaping of her identity. She now regards the plantation as her home - “ I was startled to catch myself saying wearily, ‘ Home at last.’” (127) - thereby severely calling into question the status of her house in twentieth century California. Moreover, while dining with Rufus she states - “ I put down my biscuit and reined in whatever part of my mind I’d left in 1976.” (134) - thus indicating that the change imposed on her by the slavery chronotope is accelerated by her own self fashioning as a slave, in an attempt to ease her suffering in the harsh reality encompassing her. This destabilization of Dana’s identity is articulated in Tom Weylin’s interrogation of her: ““ Who are you?’ he demanded. ‘ What are you?’... ‘ I don’t know what you want me to say,’ I told him. ‘ I’m Dana. You know me.’ ‘ Don’t tell

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me what I know!” (130); indeed, by the time Dana returns from her fourth journey to the past, it is no longer clear who she is. This is true for Kevin to an even larger extent: his identity has been reshaped so profoundly by the slavery chronotope in the five years that he spent in the past, that he feels like a stranger in his own home and century.

The dialectical shaping and reshaping of characters by the novel's two chronotopes is epitomized in the juxtaposition of the sexual intercourse between Dana and Kevin in the fictional world of 1976 California, and Rufus' attempted rape of Dana in the fictional world of mid nineteenth century Maryland. After they return to the twentieth century, Dana insists that Kevin make love to her, despite his misgivings: “‘ Go to bed,’ said Kevin... ‘ Come to bed with me.’... ‘ Come with me,’ I repeated softly. ‘ Dana, you're hurt. Your back’... ‘ Please come with me.’ He did.” (189-90). This act portrays Dana as a willful young woman with a sexual appetite, who feels secure in her own body and self confident enough to demand that her husband pleasure her. Yet shortly afterward, Dana returns to the past and is nearly raped by Rufus, in the scene which marks the culmination of the novel. The first moments of this scene portray a completely different Dana: apathetic, submissive, and ready to surrender her body to the exploitation of a man who treats her as his slave. She initially displays meekness equal to the insistence with which she implored Kevin to come to bed with her: “ I realized how easy it would be for me to continue to be still and forgive him even this. So easy, in spite of all my talk” (259). Thus, Dana's antithetical behavior in these two scenes reflects the extent in which fictional characters are shaped by the chronotopes of the worlds they inhabit. Another example

of this is Dana's agreement to write letters for Rufus, which stands in contrast to her obdurate refusal to type for Kevin. Yet despite textual evidence that the slavery chronotope almost fully erodes Dana's modern identity and reshapes her as a slave in the fictional world of the past, in the final moments of the attempted rape scene the last vestige of her modern identity drives her to rebel against Rufus: " No." (260). Ironically, she saves herself by killing him, which is once again an act of a rebellious slave, not of a free modern woman.

In the novel's dénouement Dana returns to the modern world, this time permanently, but in the process her left arm becomes " a part of the wall" (261). I suggest that her arm is caught in the gap between chronotopes, in that same space through which Rufus saw her coming to rescue him from the elements of fire and water, and which solidifies into a plaster wall after Dana kills him. One may also construe the mutilation as the price Dana must pay for undergoing such extensive reshaping as an obedient slave: she is mutilated in the same way that nineteenth century slaves were maimed as punishment for transgressions against their owners. Thus, the loss of modern identity entails the loss of an arm.

To conclude, I have attempted a close analysis of the chronotopic shaping and reshaping of fictional characters in H. G. Wells' *The Time Machine* and Octavia Butler's *Kindred*. By tracing the profound influence that travel between worlds with different chronotopes has on the protagonists of the two literary works, I have tried to show the intrinsic connection between a literary text's chronotope and its characterization.

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