

METAMODERN OSCILLATION OF TIME AND SPACE AND ITS SYMBOLIC TOOLS: DAVID MITCHELL'S POSTIRONIC WRITING IN THE NOVEL "CLOUD ATLAS"

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Summary

This paper explores the metaphorical construction of time and space in David Mitchell's "Cloud Atlas". Time and space in the novel function as interdependent, symbolically charged categories that materialize through the symbolism of clocks, focus on specific dates, conveyed through the motif of travel and diverse means of travel (as symbols of movement). Analyzing all six interconnected narratives, the article shows how characters try to master their individual spatiotemporal frameworks, embodying a postironic desire to control the abstract categories of time and space. However, these efforts are consistently undermined by the cyclicity of time and the instability of symbols, which function as carriers of bipolar emotional tension. The narrative trajectory of "Cloud Atlas" reveals a model of civilization progressing not linearly but cyclically from emergence to decline, despite persistent attempts of all the characters. Meta-modern oscillation in "Cloud Atlas" manifests through time and space as fluctuating forces of hope and collapse, progress and disappointment, which are in constant dynamic balance. Thus, "Cloud Atlas" conceptualizes time and space as a dynamic, oscillatory system that reflects emotional, ethical, and civilizational patterns across generations. The postirony of time and space cyclicity lies in the fact that all six narrators, both individually and collectively, are moving towards apocalypse while maintaining their faith in renewal.

Key words: metamodernism, postirony, symbolism, oscillation of time and space, David Mitchell's "Cloud Atlas".

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1. Introduction

The oscillation between postirony and sincerity creates the dynamic tension necessary for the metamodern novel, which makes it both profound and reflexive, in which sincerity does not negate irony, nor does irony devalue sincerity. Within such oscillatory movements postirony reveals its potential as a universal, transcultural, and productive model of thinking. Consequently, such "fluctuations" ensure the continuous movement and flexibility of metamodern concepts in the context of global cultural and technological progress in all its value and ethical manifestations.

David Mitchell's "Cloud Atlas" presents a richly layered narrative that challenges conventional perceptions of time and space. The novel portrays civilization's progress as non-linear, oscillating between emergence and decline. Synthesizing philosophical conceptions of "*time*" and "*space*" as fundamental categories through which human existence is conceptualized, G. Zoran extends this equivalence into the literary sphere: "*Independent or interdependent, space and time are perceived as complementary aspects of equal status, belonging to*

a common field of debate” (Zoran, 1984: 309). The harmonious interaction between temporal and spatial dimensions influences both the formation of imagery and the narration: “...to understand the specifics of modeling artistic time and space, it is advisable to use an interdisciplinary approach, which allows for a multi-faceted analysis of the text through the prism of philosophy, cultural studies ...” (Ishchenko, et al., 2025: 124), since even the author’s fictional world is governed by the integrative laws of the universe. Accepting the notion of an inseparable epistemological relationship between time and space, this study proceeds to examine the nature of time and space as realized within literary narrative.

2. Time and space in metamodern narrative

J. Hillis Miller argues that every literary narrative functions as an allegory of temporality, since the act of reading, by virtue of its spatial inscription, is inherently sequential. Meaning emerges precisely from the ordered succession of words: “*The words must be read one after the other if sense is to be made of the narration, just as, for human or literary temporality, moments in time follow one another until they add up to make a story*” (Hillis Miller, 2003: 91). Thus, for J. Hillis Miller, the linguistic articulation of time and space constitutes the primary object of literary analysis: “*Literature, after all, is made of words*” (Hillis Miller, 2003: 87). Grounded in M. Heidegger’s “*Being and Time*” (1927), J. Hillis Miller argues that linguistic and imagistic representations of temporality in Western languages are largely spatial, whereby time resists direct representation and instead assumes an abstract form.

M. Kane emphasizes the abstract nature of such categories as “time” and “space”, whose meaningfulness emerges through their apprehension within the reality of everyday life: “*Those wider notions themselves are not usually colourless, empty abstractions either, but are deeply influenced by experiences and perceptions of history, culture, geography*” (Kane, 2020: 3). M. Currie highlights the ontological distinction between the future as it exists within the text and the future in its general, abstract sense, arguing that the reader’s capacity to undertake a spatiotemporal journey into the future (“*an excursion into the future*”) and subsequently return to the present constitutes a singular reading experience, with no analogue in the real world. (Currie, 2006: 22). Building on the notion that time and space are imbued with meaningful events, contextual nuances, values, and emotional resonances, the spatiotemporal dimension of a literary work can be understood as a medium through which the author’s intended meanings are realized.

P. Smethurst argues that within the framework of time and space, consciousness is capable both of shaping and organizing reality and of reinterpreting it. (Smethurst, 2000: 5). Novelistic time and space convey both real and unreal worlds; in realist novels, time and space are closely aligned with empirical reality, “*close to actual historical and geographical realities to present models or microcosms of the real world*” (Smethurst, 2000: 5). At the same time, C. Bourne and E. C. Bourne argue that the fictional world only simulates the form of the actual world, without replicating its underlying ontological structures. The temporal and spatial dimensions of a literary work are subordinated to artistic intentionality rather than to the philosophical or ontological structures of empirical reality: “*...the structure of what is represented by fictions is not mirrored in the structure of the ontology provided by these realist accounts. The structure represented in fiction is world-like: things participate in events and have their properties at times and places*” (Bourne et al., 2016: 15). Thus, the framework of time and space of the novel is circumscribed by authorial meanings, narrative structure, and motifs, and is capable of materializing within the poetic dimension, most notably through symbols.

3. Constructing postirony through spatiotemporal cyclicity and emotional oscillation in “*Cloud Atlas*”

The metamodernist idea of the cyclicity and nonlinearity of progress resonates with the author’s narrative conception of “*Cloud Atlas*”, where it is realized through a nonlinear, fragmentary compositional structure that demonstrates the impossibility of sustained civilizational advancement. Taking this universal principle of metamodernist worldmaking as its foundation, D. Mitchell constructs a postironic time and space paradox across all six narratives of the novel: while each character advances *linearly* along their own spatiotemporal narrative progression, their convergence ultimately forms *a cycle* – a coherent, sequential model of the development of human civilization.

Despite their sincere efforts, the characters’ inability to alter the predetermined civilizational progression of D. Mitchell’s fictional world serves as a mechanism for generating *postirony* – an effect that becomes perceptible only from the reader’s perspective across all six narratives. Each character strives to “hear” across time and space, yet their inherent incapacity to truly listen to one another seems to oscillate them within both temporal and spatial dimensions, mirroring the very essence of metamodernist postirony. In their desire to measure their own spatiotemporal existence, at least *physically*, the characters cover distances and count the passing days.

P. M. Bray notes that a text generates a sense of movement through its narrative dynamics, metaphorical thinking, mechanisms of involuntary memory, and also through direct representations of motion, particularly in descriptions of automobiles: “*metaphors bridge the distance between places; they translate impressions and shuttle meaning*” (Bray, 2013: 216). The metaphorization of abstract notions of time and space is widespread in human culture, often mediated through recurrent symbolic forms. The sensory accessibility of these time and space symbols allows a reader to explore both their typological patterns, as well as their polysemy and context-dependent interpretive potential. The metamodernist pendulum, as a metaphor for instability, cyclicity, reinterpretation, and the continuous oscillation between opposites, corresponds to the concept of unfixed symbols – bearers of bipolar emotional tension.

4. Metaphorizing time and space: symbols in David Mitchell’s “*Cloud Atlas*”

The characters in D. Mitchell’s novel are connected not only across space and time but also, within their own narratives, they strive to assert control over their individual time and space, enacting the postironic notion of mastery over the abstract categories of time and space. Thus, time in the novel is metaphorically represented through *the symbolism of clocks* and *focus on specific dates*, while space is conveyed through *the motif of travel* and *diverse means of travel* as symbols of movement. Crucially, despite analyzing the symbols of time and space separately, the spatiotemporal dynamics operate holistically, without separating time from space. Time and space oscillations demonstrate unity and simultaneously reflect the emotional fluctuations within the novel, as well as the cyclicity of civilizational progress.

The clocks appearing in the characters’ narratives carry informational significance and possess a symbolic nature:

The clocks seem to pursue Robert Frobisher, insistently reminding him to hurry, as his time rapidly slips away: “*To the west, cows graze in the meadow, and the church tower rises above the wood beyond. Its bells are my own clock. (In truth, Zedelghem boasts a good*

many antique clocks, whose chimes go off some early, some late, like a Bruges in miniature)" (Mitchell, 2004: 137).

– In Luisa Rey's story, the author specifies the exact time of Joe Napier's death: "Second to last, an inset digital clock blinks from 21:57 to 21:58" (Mitchell, 2004: 792), which coincides with Margo's awakening from a coma in the hospital, symbolizing an inevitable, time-regulated reckoning.

– In Timothy Cavendish's story, a clock, stolen on the street, symbolizes the loss of romantic feelings between the character and his wife. "My sixtysomething wrist was winched back through ninety degrees of agony, and my Ingersoll Solar was unclasped.... «Had my purloined Ingersoll not been a love present from a sunnier era of our now-Arctic marriage, I would have kept mum about the entire incident" (Mitchell, 2004: 279).

– "Time", as a complex philosophical category, is rendered concretely within the characters' mental landscapes. **The focus on specific dates** functions as a metaphorical movement of both the characters and human civilization through time, structured and regulated by letters, diaries, video recordings (an orison), and memoirs:

1. Adam Ewing meticulously records the passage of time in the diary of his journey. The reader can closely trace the dynamics of the character's emotional and physical exhaustion over time.

2. Each letter to Rufus Sixsmith is dated, as Robert Frobisher's own reckoning of time is measured through the letters to his beloved.

3. Timothy Cavendish temporarily loses his sense of time: upon entering Aurora's house and undergoing treatment, he becomes disoriented with regard to temporal orientation: "No, I was stuck in Aurora House all right. A clock with no hands" (Mitchell, 2004: 436).

4. Sonmi, the fabricant, narrates her story to the Archivist in a precise chronological order. This temporal structuring is significant not merely for recording events, but for observing the trajectory of Sonmi's evolution – from a clone-waitress to a self-conscious individual.

5. The only exception is Zachry's narrative, which is both chronologically extreme and continuous, occupying a central position in the novel. For Zachry, conventional temporal categories – past, present, and future – do not yet exist. His tribe does not measure time according to the clock-based systems of the "advanced" civilizations of the Prescients; instead, the tribe experiences time cyclically, mirroring the ceaseless alternation of the Sun and the Moon in the sky. The concept of rebirth within the tribe, occurring immediately after death, reintegrates each individual into the communal framework, strengthening tribal cohesion, moral integrity, and belief in the perpetuity of righteous existence. Significantly, Zachry lacks familiarity with clocks and he experiences fear toward them: "When I was a schooler I was 'fraid of that tick-tockin' spider watchin' n' judgin' us». Водночас старійшини племені знають, що час важливий для цивілізації: "I mem'ry Abbess sayin', Civ'lize needs time, an' if we let this clock die, time'll die too, an' then how can we bring back the Civ'lize Days as it was b'fore the Fall?" (Mitchell, 2004: 460). The impulse to "reinvent" time and live in accordance with its laws represents a fundamental human necessity. Zachry's primitive tribal society gradually progresses toward an awareness of itself at the chronological inception of the civilizational clock; in reclaiming time, humanity initiates a new cycle in the unfolding of history.

The motif of travel embodies both spatial and temporal transformation and is realized uniquely within each six stories. Through their journeys, the characters encounter new worlds, expand the boundaries of their thought, and undergo mental and existential changes. Each journey entails not only the negotiation of physical distance and engagement with unfamiliar people, but also a rigorous testing of inner capacities and the steadfastness of personal convictions in wholly novel and unpredictably challenging contexts:

1. Adam Ewing's maritime journey offers insight into the profound consequences of colonial and missionary endeavors, while simultaneously exposing the spectrum of human behavior – from loyalty and friendship to moral corruption and betrayal.

2. Robert Frobisher's journey to his distinguished mentor's residence, and his subsequent escape to Bruges, illuminates his latent musical potential, demonstrating how personal challenges both impede and catalyze artistic growth.

3. The pursuit of Luisa Rey's compels her to flee, yet she continues her quest for Sixsmith's report, gaining like-minded collaborators and essential assistance throughout her journey.

4. Timothy Cavendish's escape to Aurora's house, followed by his rescue, exemplifies the triumph of friendship and collaborative agency over the constraints of age and entrenched social biases.

5. Sonmi's escape from the restaurant and ensuing journey constitute a trajectory of spiritual enlightenment and the acquisition of experiential and cognitive insight.

6. Zachry's journey beyond the settlement with Meronym allows the protagonist to gradually shed fears, prejudices, and illusions, while acquiring new principles and convictions.

The journeys in "Cloud Atlas" are not solely pedestrian (as with Zakri and Meronym) but also traverse *diverse means of travel* – ship, airplane, car, and even a futuristic vessel of the future – guiding the characters along the narrative arc of a personal development. However, the notion of mastering space loses its significance once the symbolism of individual vehicles revealed as explicitly postironic:

– "Prophetess" – the name of the ship whose repair Ewing anticipates from the opening pages foreshadows the ambivalent nature of the colonial "civilizing" and Christianizing mission. Yet the vessel's prophetic significance is realized solely for Luisa Rey, for it is aboard this ship that Sixsmith's report comes to light.

– The vessel "Papa Song's Golden Ark", which Sonmi boards, functions simultaneously as a lethal mechanism for certain fabricants, processed into soap, and as nourishment for other clones who consume it – an explicitly postironic, futuristic meditation on the cyclical nature of life.

– Zachry and his tribe refer to the vessel of the Prescients as the "The Great Ship o' the Prescients", trusting in the Prescients' limitless wisdom and seemingly transcendent technologies. Zachry and his tribe are unaware that all the Prescients' efforts are directed toward finding ways to preserve the remnants of human civilization and ensure survival.

– The car journey for the fabricant Sonmi is not just a path toward knowledge or personal growth, nor a conscious choice; it is a constrained opportunity to encounter a world beyond the limits of her designated function. For Sonmi, the automobile symbolizes the replacement of one set of constraints with another – an illusion of a journey toward freedom.

– Unlike Sonmi, the genetically related journalist Luisa Rey personally drives the car, which becomes for her a symbol of control over her own fate and of the active pursuit of truth amid morally complex decisions, "an image of an independent wise woman" (Babelyuk, et al., 2019: 63), "her own success is a priority for her" (Babelyuk, et al., 2019: 69). However, resistance to the system – which will, in the future, evolve into a destructive authoritarian machine – yields only short-term results in Luisa's story, creating the illusion of journalistic victory and public agency.

– The car and train by which Timothy Cavendish flees symbolize a movement toward freedom, yet this freedom is conditional and temporary. His escape – first by train, then by car – is a chaotic navigation of obstacles and difficulties, many of which he has brought upon himself. Even after covering such a long distance, Timothy fails to overcome his own faintheartedness and irresponsibility.

– After delivering a copy of the crucial report to Luisa Rey, the physicist Isaac Sachs becomes a victim of an explosion. The airplane he had intended to escape in becomes a symbol of the sacrificial nature of science in the service of ethics, emphasizing that moral principles must be defended rather than evaded.

5. Conclusions

It is crucial to note that D. Mitchell's characters in "Cloud Atlas", bound by the constraints of their individual temporal and spatial horizons, subconsciously endeavor to align their actions across multiple genetic generations. Their pursuit of liberation from personal prejudices, internal development, and creative fulfillment requires journeys that are simultaneously psychological and existential. Yet the postironic structuring of time and space – characterized by cyclical recurrence and perpetual oscillation – subverts linear progression and sustained advancement, standing in tension with the principles of metamodernist temporality.

In "Cloud Atlas", symbolic instruments of temporal measurement, the motif of travel, and diverse means of travel as tools for negotiating space and as emblems of transformation and progress are rendered into conventional human technologies, documenting both the cumulative civilizational time of humanity and the cultural limits of nations. Clocks, letters, diaries, video recordings, and memoirs provide only a partial accounting of a civilization's existence, while advanced means of transport offer no assurance of evading the decline of the humankind.

The postirony inherent in time and space cyclicity consists in the simultaneous trajectory of six narrative points – and the totality of these points – toward both apocalypse and the decline of civilization, while paradoxically sustaining belief in the inception of a subsequent cycle: "a cyclical apocalyptic narrative" (Hicks, 2010: 55). In progressing forward, each character traverses the developmental trajectory requisite to their growth, yet when considered across the entirety of all six narratives, the story advances cyclically along a predetermined course – from genesis to civilizational decay.

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