

“(Un)Dreamable Dreams:” Temporality and Dream in Alice Walker’s *The Temple of My Familiar* and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*

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Abstract:

In their novels, Alice Walker and Toni Morrison contemplate the theme of the temporality of human existence. The writers populate their novels with characters whose understanding of their existence in time is deeply affected by their past life experience. The paper focuses on Miss Lissie from *The Temple of My Familiar* and Sethe from *Beloved* as representatives of two contradictory approaches to understanding one’s temporality. The temporality of the characters is closely associated with the concept of dream. In both novels, dream assumes a variety of manifestations, ranging from proper dreams to dream-like sensations of waking life such as hallucinations and flashbacks of past occurrences. Working with Paul Ricoeur’s theory of temporality and narrative acts, the paper identifies the relationships of the characters to the time frame of their existence. Miss Lissie is fully conscious of her position among the three time modes, which the author demonstrates by the significant presence of proper dreams and dream memories in connection with her. Sethe, though, lacks dream memories, yet her life is marked by various dream-like phenomena, which illustrates the disrupted perception of her temporality. The paper argues that the various dream manifestations present or even absent from the novels inform the reader of the characters’ temporal experience. Through the manifestations of dream the reader perceives the quality of the characters’ temporality even prior to their own realization of it

I. Introduction

The term dream has ceased to refer merely to brain activity of a sleeping body, and has extended its coverage to phenomena characterized by features analogous to those of proper dreams. Into the semantically rich category of dream one may include such varied dream-like sensations of waking life as hallucinations, visions, daydreams or recurring flashbacks of past incidents. Throughout the analysis, I work with the concept of dream on two distinct levels. On the first level, I use the term as a general category. Dream in general, then, encompasses all its manifestations, in particular proper dreams of a sleeping body as well as the dream-like phenomena of waking life, which all constitute the term’s second level. The word “undreamable” in the title of the paper enlarges the notion of dream with yet another meaning. In Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved*, which forms its original context and from which I borrow the expression, it refers to the unbearable quality of proper dreams. While asleep, one of the novel’s main characters, Sethe, suffers from dreams, the content of which is particularly difficult for her to endure. She admits to having “undreamable dreams about whether the headless feetless torso hanging in the tree with a sign on it was her husband or Paul A” (Morrison 1997:251). In relation to *Beloved* the word “undreamable” also denotes the above mentioned dream-like sensations which are not dreamt in the proper sense of the word, but are lived through or experienced while the characters’ minds are fully awake. The dream-like phenomena lack the dreaming activity, yet they

preserve the qualities and characteristics of proper dreams. This makes it possible to call these experiences “undreamable.”

Regardless of the nature of the particular sensation, be it a proper dream, a flashback or a daydream, all these acquire their content from the past. In *The Interpretation of Dreams* Sigmund Freud explains, quoting F. W. Hildebrandt, that “whatever the dreams may offer, they derive their material from reality [...] in other words from what we have already experienced either externally or internally” (qtd. in Freud 1998:44). Later, Freud rephrases the idea, maintaining that “all the material making up the content of a dream is in some way derived from experience” (Freud 1998:44). Although the citation refers only to proper dreams, it may be concluded that all the manifestations of dream are closely associated with human existence and experience in time, in other words with human temporality.

In the two novels chosen for the paper, *The Temple of My Familiar* (1989) by Alice Walker and *Beloved* (1987) by Toni Morrison, various manifestations of dream are employed. Despite their diverse nature, the majority of the manifestations is indeed connected with the characters’ existence in, and relation to time. In the following analysis, I will concentrate on the characters’ awareness of their temporal existence as well as on their relationships to time in general. While introducing the concept of temporality, I work with *Temps et récit* by the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur, in which the author attempts to define the relation between time and narrative in fiction and historiography. Dealing with Augustine’s and Aristotle’s theories, Ricoeur shows the interconnectedness between time and narrative and also maintains that the very existence of time and narrative is conditioned by this interconnectedness. With regard to dreams, I will demonstrate that the various forms of dream used in the novels help the reader to understand the relationship between the characters and time. Although in the novels under discussion various narrative acts are crucial for the characters’ understanding of their temporal experience in particular and of temporality in general, I argue that they are dream manifestations which function for the reader as auxiliary mediators of the characters’ relations to time. Even prior to the acts of narration, which assert the characters’ position in time, dream reveals to the reader what the particular character-time relationship is or might be.

II. The Threefold Present

Before I can proceed to the analysis of the roles, functions and manifestations of dream in the novels, it is essential that I briefly present the theory of time as developed by the medieval philosopher Augustine in his *Confessiones* and later elaborated on by Paul Ricoeur. Augustine faces the problem of the existence of time, which he expresses in the following words, “What, then, is time? [...] I know well enough what it is, provided that nobody asks me; but if I am asked what it is and try to explain, I am baffled” (qtd. in Ricoeur 1990:xi). Paul Ricoeur summarizes the argument of sceptics that “time has no being since the future is not yet, the past is no longer, and the present does not remain” (Ricoeur 1990:7). Alice Walker herself paraphrases the same idea of the possible non-existence of time when she writes in *The Temple of My Familiar*, “an old photograph, an old letter, or a scent from time that otherwise [does] not exist” (Walker 1990:245). The starting point of Augustine’s contemplation is, then, the fact that despite his awareness of time past and certain expectations about the future, he still cannot comprehend the very essence of time itself.

The solution which Augustine eventually produces is the concept of the threefold present. He explains that only in the exact moment of experiencing and realizing the present is the subject capable of viewing past moments and in this way he or she also conceives of the past itself. By this reasoning Augustine obtains an argument corroborating the existence of past time. He applies an analogous procedure to the future. Again, only through recognizing one’s being in the present can one anticipate or understand things which are only to occur and thus one can also speak about the future in which the things will take place. The two concepts which mediate the experiencing of the past and subsequently of the future are remembering and expectation respectively. The vital ability which facilitates remembering is human memory, or more precisely its capacity for recalling impressions of past events. Regarding expectation Paul Ricoeur once again paraphrases Augustine: “it is thanks to a present expectation that future things are present to us as things to come. We have a ‘pre-perception’ of this which enables us to ‘foretell’ them” (Ricoeur 1990:11). Whereas the particular past images, and thus also past time in general, reveal themselves to the subject through impressions which are recalled

from human memory, the future makes itself visible via signs of events which the subject expects. It is important to emphasise that both remembering and expectation are processes taking place in the present, which explains the threefold character of the present; it is the time continuum in which all the three modes of time meet and are perceivable by the subject. From the subject's point of view, the past, the present and the future coexist in the present. Yet they preserve a degree of independence, and therefore it remains possible for the subject to understand them and also accept his or her position among them.

Complicated as the theory of the threefold present may seem, its clearest demonstration is provided in the act of reading. In an interview with Erik Nakjavani, Paul Ricoeur maintains that "text is something to be interpreted because it is open to an unlimited number of possible readings," from which stems that no work of fiction is complete until it is read and in this way also interpreted by the reader (Ricoeur 1981:1086). The act of reading is fundamental for the work of fiction, as only in reading does the work create a relationship with the reader and thus preserve its existence. Regardless of the time in which the particular incident takes place within the time framework of the novel, the reader perceives it only in the exact moment of the reading act, when he or she experiences it, and therefore views all the incidents as if they were happening in the present. In other words, from the point of view of the reader, both the past and future experiences of the characters blur into a flow of episodes occurring in the present. What is more, it is characteristic of *The Temple of My Familiar* and *Beloved* alike that the writers employ multiple temporal and spatial shifts as well as shifts in the narrators' voices and perspectives. Ikenna Dieke describes the pattern of *The Temple of My Familiar* as "the insistent particularity of each individual story [of the novel]" (Dieke 1992:508). Dieke focuses merely on Alice Walker's novel but similar imagery of particularity and fragmentation is also recognizable in the novel by Toni Morrison. With regard to *Beloved*, Philip Page argues that the novel "explicitly addresses the issue of fusion and fragmentation [...] The thematic and formal power of [the novel] is evident in the pattern of circularity" (Page 1995:134). The scheme of constantly changing, disappearing and (re)emerging fragments of the characters' lives and experiences together with the fluctuating temporal settings compel the reader engaged in the reading act to perceive all the episodes in the novels as if they were happening in the present.

III. Miss Lissie, Sethe and Temporality

Although the theory of the threefold present answers the question of the existence of time in all its three modes – the past, the present and the future – it introduces complications for some characters of the novels. Unless the impressions of their past experiences and/or the signs of expected future incidents are explicitly narrated, the characters' existence in the present is constantly threatened by unexpected reappearances of impressions or signs in the form of dreamlike phenomena such as flashbacks, visions or hallucinations. Miss Lissie in *The Temple of My Familiar* stands in a marked contrast to Sethe in *Beloved* when the reader considers their approaches to narrative acts and consequently to their existence in the time continuum in general. Whereas Miss Lissie constantly engages herself in storytelling not only of past incidents but sometimes even of those yet to come, Sethe perpetually evades the occasions of telling and listening to stories. While Miss Lissie shares the stories of her past freely, Toni Morrison, or her characters, must always prompt Sethe to give her recollections – which she eventually does, but only reluctantly and partially. Sethe's daughter Denver reminds her: "You never told me all what happened. Just that they whipped you and you run off, pregnant. With me" (Morrison 1997:36). Although after this stimulus Sethe continues with the story, very soon "[s]he stopped. [And] Denver knew that her mother was through with it – for now anyway. [...] Sethe had reached the point beyond which she would not go" (Morrison 1997:37). From the dichotomy of readiness and unwillingness to share the stories of one's past the reader comprehends the presence or absence of awareness concerning the characters' existence in time. Miss Lissie clearly distinguishes her memories of the past from the experiences of the present, while Sethe's perception of the past and of the present is obscured by a continual intermingling of past impressions with present experiences. It is important to emphasize that by the act of narrating the impressions and memories of the past the characters become aware of the past and recognize it as a constitutive element of their present identity. When narrated and realized, though, the past is not to be abandoned, but rather incorporated into the characters' perception of their existence in the present. Concerning *The Temple*

of *My Familiar*, Ikenna Dieke comments on the procedure in the following words: “crucial to each character’s quest for identity is the personal effort to recapture the past as a significant element in present experience” (Dieke 1992:508). When, on the other hand, the impressions remain unnarrated, they materialize in the present nonetheless; only now they manifest themselves as dreams and dream-like sensations of flashbacks and hallucinations which are not expected by the characters. An example in *Beloved* is Sethe who is literally haunted by materializations of the repressed impressions of her past life.

The following section of the paper elaborates on yet more instances illustrating Miss Lissie’s and Sethe’s contradictory attitudes towards storytelling and thus also towards the temporal frames of their existence. Alice Walker depicts Miss Lissie as a lady who is “a lot of women” (Walker 1990:38) and whose name means “the one who remembers everything” (Walker 1990:52). Her character functions as a reincarnating self who ceaselessly shifts through times and eras and who sees herself as a “traveller [...] follow[ing] [...] ancient and pre-ancient paths” (Walker 1990:366). Other characters perceive her as “[t]his particular concentrated energy that was Lissie” (Walker 1990:44) or as a person with “no certain definite form” (Walker 1990:91). From the very beginning of the novel, Miss Lissie is able to tell and retell experiences of her previous lives. She often refers to places and bodies she has sojourned in, as depicted in the following quotations: “[o]f my earlier lives in Egypt an Atlantis I recall nothing” (Walker 1990: 52), or “I have always been a black woman” (Walker 1990:53), or yet further in the story, “in addition to being a man, and white, [...] I was also, at least once, myself a lion” (Walker 1990:366). Apart from the memories of her past lives Miss Lissie is also capable of perceiving and announcing signs and expectations of the future. Upon dying, she maintains, “I regret leaving Hal, and am anxious as to our chances of coming together again [...] and I have every faith we will meet again, and no doubt soon” (Walker 1990:353). Miss Lissie’s ability to talk freely about her past and future selves together with her skill of evoking any of her lives or experiences signifies her awareness of the three time entities together with an acceptance of her position among them. Her incarnations in different bodies and times have helped her to understand the existence of past, present and future, as she herself declares connectedness “to all three planes – past, present, future – of life” (Walker 1990:196). Miss Lissie’s approach to time evokes and demonstrates one of the basic patterns of the novels discussed above, in particular that of circularity.

Sethe in *Beloved*, on the other hand, is an example of a character who opposes what Caroline Rody calls the “mutual talking cure” with members of her community and who is consequently fixed in an unnarrated present, thoroughly unprotected against recurring impressions of her past life (qtd. in Carden 1999:410). An example appears at the beginning of the novel when Sethe herself comments on the situation of not being in possession of her own memories: “She [Sethe] might be hurrying across a field [...] Nothing else would be in her mind [...] Nothing [...] Then something [...] and suddenly there was Sweet Home rolling, rolling, rolling out before her eyes” (Morrison 1997:6). Whereas Miss Lissie is aware of the three temporal planes to such an extent that she assists other characters in the process of realization, Sethe slowly struggles to achieve this awareness throughout the whole novel. While Miss Lissie urges Suwelo to remember his parents who tragically died in a car accident and who thus “must be consciously called up, called upon, re-called” (Walker 1990:354), Sethe is so haunted by the unexpected occurrences of her memories of the past that her daughter admits that “[i]f the whitepeople of Cincinnati had allowed Negroes into their lunatic asylum they could have found candidates in 124 [Sethe’s house]” (Morrison 1997:250). Where Miss Lissie recalls the past lives of being a lion or a white man, Sethe openly confesses that “[i]t’s so hard for [her] to believe in” time (Morrison 1997:35), which she confirms later by feeling as if “wrapped in a timeless present” (Morrison 1997:184) and still later she simply perceives herself as existing in “no-time” (Morrison 1997:191). All the examples demonstrate Sethe’s serious problems with accepting her position within the time continuum and with understanding the past and the present of her existence as two entities which are interconnected yet to a certain degree separate.

IV. Miss Lissie, Sethe and the Manifestations of Dream

As much as the theory of the threefold present constitutes difficulties for characters like Sethe when their time experience remains unnarrated, it also creates complications for the reader who, while engaged in the act of reading, is unable to distinguish the three time planes of the characters’

existence. This stems from the reader's perception of the past, present and future incidents of the novel as if all are occurring in the present. Whereas the act of narration enhances the characters' understanding of time, the presence or absence of dream manifestations, together with their shapes and forms, assist the reader in pre-perception of the characters' relationship to time even prior to their narrative acts. In other words, the reader perceives Miss Lissie's awareness of the three temporal modes, in which her various selves dwell or have dwelt, and her ability to distinguish one from the other and Sethe's completely disrupted notion of her temporal existence through the concept of dream.

The reader comprehends Miss Lissie's relationship to time as coherent from her sharing of her past existences and memories which she frequently alludes to as dreams. As an explanation Miss Lissie elaborates, "I've actually heard this! That babies have no memories; that they are empty of knowledge and experience; that, in fact, there is no one there. This is insane. Of course, the memories that they have appear to babies as dreams indecipherable to themselves because they are no longer in those contexts" (Walker 1990:54). For the reader, the quotation documents Miss Lissie's understanding of temporality, which is so profound that she repeatedly defines the nature of the human mind, memory and proper dreams, all of which serve as bridges or communication channels with her own pasts, both collective and individual. She maintains that the primary characteristic of the human mind is "to recall anything that was ever known" (Walker 1990:65), which to a great extent justifies her awareness of her past and also of her future incarnations. However, Miss Lissie is constantly made by circumstance to disguise her past memories as mere stories collected from other sources. When she engages herself in the narrative act of recalling her past lives, she is cautioned by a "little white woman professor:" "I wish you'd try not to say 'I remember thus and so' about your African experiences. It is claiming more than you could possibly know, and besides that, it is confusing" (Walker 1990:65). Concepts such as reincarnation or in Miss Lissie's case, her "roaming through the ages," may not be wholly accepted by the predominantly empirically based readers of the end of the twentieth century (Walker 1990:112). If those readers represented by the "white woman professor" perceive direct memories of the slave trade and slavery as confusing, Miss Lissie's other memories of when she "stayed with the cousins and hung out in their trees," in other words when she was "a pygmy," are even less likely to be believed (Walker 1990:92). Alice Walker implies that these are communicable only when camouflaged as dreams. Thus Miss Lissie offers a compromise, coining the phrase "dream memory" and explains its origin:

In the dream world of my memory [...] there is something. [T]he memory, like the mind, has the capacity to dream, and just as the memory exists at a deeper level of consciousness than thinking, so the dream world of the memory is at a deeper level still. I will tell you of the dream on which my memory, as well as my mind, rests. (Walker 1990:82)

The novel is interspersed with Miss Lissie's memories, which she frequently introduces as dream memories or merely as proper dreams which she experiences while asleep. "Last night I dreamed I was showing you my temple" is the presentation of one of her crucial narrated stories (Walker 1990:116). At other places the reader encounters similar formulations, instances of which are, "My life with the cousins is the only dream memory of peace that I have" (Walker 1990:86-87), "Let me tell you a story [...] It is a dream memory, too" (Walker 1990:356) or with yet another memory, "This is one of those dream memories so frayed around the edges that it is like an old shawl" (Walker 1990:366). The quotations refer to Miss Lissie's ability to distinguish the past when the remembered events took place from the present when she narrates them. They also indicate her power to weld the past and present together again through the act of storytelling. In addition for the reader, the quotations signify that the presence of dream memories and proper dreams is closely associated with the characters' complete understanding of temporality and also of their position among the three temporal modes.

Whereas *The Temple of My Familiar* is marked by Miss Lissie's significant narrations of the dream memories of the past, in Sethe's life, the dream memories are not present. From the above mentioned example of Sethe's memory of Sweet Home stems that manifestation of dream are present in the novel, but their form is as disrupted as Sethe's perception of temporality itself. The manifestations are primarily visions, flashbacks and nightmares, in general the dream-like phenomena, which invade Sethe's present life. As Philip Page maintains, "one word, detail, or image drop into

their [the characters'] consciousness and reminds them of some part of their buried past" (qtd. in Lock 1995). Sethe attempts to speak about her past, the story of which prompts some of her other memories and she is made to realize that "there it [the past] was again" (Morrison 1997:4). However, Toni Morrison does not instigate the unexpected memories of the past merely through words, details or images, but also through physical sensations: "Followed by the two girls, down a bright green corridor of oak and horse chestnut, Sethe began to sweat a sweat just like the other one when she woke, mud-caked, on the banks of the Ohio" (Morrison 1997:90). Sweating is the introduction after which the uncalled for memory of Sethe's escape from slavery appears. On the one hand, the dream-like phenomena inform the reader that Sethe still dwells in the present which consists of undistinguished, unnarrated, and thus still repressed elements of the past. On the other hand, however, the frequent occurrences of flashbacks, of which the most significant is Sethe's murdered daughter Beloved who appears in a visceral form, eventually compel her to remember the past incidents, narrate them and separate the impressions and memories of past times from her consciousness of the present. In other words, the dream-like phenomena force Sethe to become aware of her past as of a constituent of her present self, not as of an element to be repressed.

So that the reader is able to perceive Sethe's disrupted notion of her existence in time further, yet another kind of absence of dream in her life has to be mentioned. In *Beloved*, Toni Morrison pursues the concept of loss and resulting absence. This indicates that the lack of dream memories and the explicit absence of expectations and dreams referring to the future enhance, on the one hand, the novel's complex design, and, on the other, emphasise Sethe's misunderstanding of her temporality. Apart from "work[ing] hard to remember as close to nothing as was safe" (Morrison 1997:6), which means repressing her past memories, Sethe's other occupation is that of "not having any dreams [of future life] of her own at all" (Morrison 1997:20). She confesses that "her brain was not interested in the future. Loaded with the past and hungry for more, it left her no room to imagine, let alone plan for, the next day" (Morrison 1997:70). From these examples the reader understands the degree of confusion with which Sethe perceives her own temporal existence. She remains unable to distinguish the past, the present and the future as individual entities, and neither is she capable of viewing herself as dwelling in the present only. Rather, Sethe's perception of the past and the present blur into an undistinguishable unity whereas the future does not exist for her at all. Only relatively late in the novel, when her gradual comprehension of temporality emerges, does Sethe make future plans once again. In winter she dreams up or "plot[s] a garden of vegetables and flowers – talking, talking about what colours it would have" (Morrison 1997:240). Through this first gentle recognition of the future the reader perceives Sethe's eventual acceptance of the three essential elements of time, which eventually also leads to her recovery from the intruding dream-like flashbacks and hallucinations of her past. For the reader, the most illustrative example of Sethe's final recovery and her understanding of the time connected with it, is the disappearance of Sethe's "bad dream," of her ghost daughter Beloved. About this, the narrator writes at the end of the novel that people

forgot her [Beloved] like a bad dream [...] those that saw her that day on the porch quickly and deliberately forgot her. It took longer for those who had spoken to her, lived with her, fallen in love with her, to forget, until they realized they couldn't remember or repeat a single thing she said [...]. So in the end, they forgot her too. [...] So they forgot her. Like an unpleasant dream during a troubling sleep. (Morrison 1997:275-76)

The presented analysis indicates that *Beloved* and *The Temple of My Familiar* are novels in which the characters' relationships to the time framework of their existence play an important role. Paul Ricoeur's theory of narrative acts which reassert the subjects' awareness of their existence in time is helpful for the characters' own understanding of their temporality. Dreams, on the other hand, suggest the quality of the mentioned understanding primarily for the reader. In other words, even before the characters' affirmation of their temporality through storytelling, the reader is able to assume what the character-time relationship is. The presence of proper dreams and dream memories together with Miss Lissie's straightforward acknowledgement of them in *The Temple of My Familiar* provides the reader with a pre-perception of her awareness of the three distinct time elements. By contrast, in *Beloved*, nightmares, flashbacks and visions of the past encroaching upon Sethe's present existence, together

with her denial of future dreams, inform the reader about her initial lack of understanding of her own temporal existence.

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