

An Interpretation of Cloud, Castle, Lake from the Perspective of Bakhtin's Chronotope Theory

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Abstract: *Cloud, Castle, Lake* is one of the representative short stories by Russian-American author Vladimir Nabokov. The work has garnered academic attention and discussion for its unique narrative structure and profound thematic depth. The story follows the journey of Vasiliy, an exile, who seeks spiritual solace through the interplay of memory and reality, yet ultimately fails to escape the constraints of his circumstances. Scholars have analyzed the novel from perspectives including exile literature, memory narrative, and existential struggles. This thesis applies Bakhtin's Chronotope Theory to explore the protagonist's survival dilemmas in a heterogeneous culture and his pursuit of an idealized existence by interpreting the closed chronotope, the path chronotope, and the idyllic chronotope within the story. Through an analysis of the metaphorical significance of these chronotopes, the thesis reveals Vasiliy's struggle between memory and reality.

1. Introduction

Nabokov's novels feature a concise, non-linear timeline, shifting between memory and reality. In Nabokov's novel *Cloud, Castle, Lake*, he creates multiple metaphorical imagery, which drives the construction of characterization and storyline through the integration of time and space. The plot consists of changing spatial scenes and a constant dialogue between reality and memory time space, showing the character's journey of exploration. The thesis analyses Vasiliy's journey of discovery by focusing on the metaphorical space of the work based on Bakhtin's theory of Chronotope. It explores how the Chronotopes on the physical, social, and spiritual levels drive the plot, build characterization, and present the character's psychology. With the aim of demonstrating the importance and effectiveness of the Chronotope in narratives, the analysis shows that Nabokov is adept at perceiving space-time, creating multiple Chronotopes for his works, and attempting to connect and merge the remembered space-time with the present space-time to create a new world to escape from the present heterogeneous cultural environment.

2. Literature Review

Cloud, Castle, Lake, a short story written by Nabokov in 1937, tells the tale of a man named Vasiliy who attempts to escape reality and seek an ideal utopia during a journey. Despite its brevity, the story's profound themes and distinctive artistic techniques make it a text of significant research

value. This part aims to review the current state of research on Nabokov and his works, both domestically and internationally, explore the achievements and shortcomings of existing studies, and provide directions for future research.

2.1 Studies Abroad

International scholarship on Nabokov began in the 1960s and has since developed into a rich research system, encompassing monographs, collections, and academic papers. The focus of research has gradually shifted from early analyses of formal techniques to broader explorations of themes, ethics, and cultural contexts.

From the 1960s to the 1980s, scholars primarily focused on the formal techniques of Nabokov's works, emphasizing their structure, style, and linguistic artistry. Page Stegner (1966) pioneered the aesthetic analysis of Nabokov's works in the first monograph. Through close readings of Nabokov's English-language works, Stegner identified the pursuit of artistic immortality as the core theme of Nabokov's creations^[1]. In the next year, Andrew Field (1967) expanded the scope of research by comprehensively analyzing all of Nabokov's published works, interpreting them as an organic whole^[2]. These studies laid the foundation for formalist criticism of Nabokov.

In the 1980s, scholars began to explore the ethical and moral dimensions of Nabokov's works. Ellen Pifer (1980) challenged the prevailing aesthetic focus, emphasizing the implicit moral concerns in Nabokov's writings^[3]. Pekka Tammi (1985) employed classical narratological methods to provide a detailed examination of the narrative features in nearly all of Nabokov's works, offering new perspectives on the integration of form and theme^[4].

Since the 1990s, Nabokov studies have entered a phase of comprehensive research. Brian Boyd's two-volume biography, *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years* (1990) and *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years* (1991), provided a thorough analysis of Nabokov's life and works, arguing that his artistic techniques reflect a profound love for life and a quest for a transcendent world beyond death^{[5][6]}. Julian W. Connolly (1999) explored the symbolism and metaphors in Nabokov's works, suggesting that natural imagery expresses his pursuit of an ideal world, while also analyzing the relationship between Nabokov's artistic vision and his multicultural background^[7].

2.2 Studies at Home

Domestic research on Nabokov began relatively late, starting in the early 1980s. Early studies were primarily introductory. By the 1990s, research began to deepen, though it remained largely focused on a few works, such as *Lolita*.

Since 2000, domestic research has entered a phase of rapid development, with scholars analyzing Nabokov's works from perspectives such as narratology, ethics, and cultural identity, offering many valuable insights. However, the scope of research remains limited, with most studies concentrating on novels like *Lolita* and *Pale Fire*, while short stories, poetry, and plays receive less attention. *Cloud, Castle, Lake*, as one of Nabokov's significant short stories, has yet to be thoroughly studied.

3. Chronotope Theory

The term "chronotope" originates from the Greek words for "time" and "space." Bakhtin (1981) first systematically elaborated on the "Chronotope Theory" in *Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel: Notes toward a Historical Poetics*. He stated, "In literature, the artistic chronotope is the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed" ^[8]. In his definition, Bakhtin particularly emphasized the origin of the chronotope and its metaphorical significance in literary studies.

Through the studies on works ranging from ancient Greek novels and chivalric romances to those of Rabelais, Goethe, and Dostoevsky, Bakhtin developed a profound understanding of historical time and formed his unique theoretical framework on time and space. He emphasized that the chronotope is not merely the background of a narrative but its core driving force^[8]. Different types of chronotopes reflect distinct historical periods and cultural contexts, while also shaping various literary genres and narrative styles.

The significance of the chronotope theory lies in its provision of a new perspective for literary analysis, enabling researchers to interpret the deeper meanings of a work through the interplay of time and space. Bakhtin's theory highlights the inseparability of time and space in narrative, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of a work's structure and themes. Bakhtin believed that the chronotope is not only a tool for narrative but also a reflection of cultural and social ideologies.

Time and space hold a significant place in Nabokov's novels, and Bakhtin's chronotope theory provides a unique perspective and methodology for studying the temporal and spatial artistry in Nabokov's works. This approach helps reveal the deeper implications of Nabokov's artistic use of time and space. His works often break traditional boundaries of time and space, employing non-linear narratives and multiple perspectives to create unique chronotopes. His writing is imbued with philosophical reflections on time and space, reflecting his profound insights into human existence and destiny. In *Cloud, Castle, Lake*, Nabokov intertwines reality and dreams through the protagonist's memories and fantasies, crafting a chronotope rich in symbolic meaning. Applying Bakhtin's chronotope theory to analyze this text allows for a deeper understanding of its structure and themes.

4. Chronotopes of Memory and Exile in *Cloud, Castle, Lake*

In *Cloud, Castle, Lake*, the interplay of time and space serves as a central narrative device, reflecting Vasilii's existential struggles and psychological journey. Through Bakhtin's chronotope theory, this analysis explores the novel's intricate construction of metaphorical spaces, which reveal the tensions between reality and ideal, memory and present, and individuality and collective oppression. The discussion is structured into three levels: the physical level, where closed chronotopes highlight communication barriers and existential dilemmas; the social level, where the train as a path chronotope exposes the harsh realities of collective violence and Vasilii's alienation; and the spiritual level, where the idyllic chronotope of the cloud, castle, and lake heals his fractured psyche and symbolizes his resistance to a heterogeneous culture. By examining these chronotopes, this thesis uncovers how Nabokov uses time and space to construct Vasilii's journey, ultimately revealing the universal human struggle to reconcile memory, identity, and the desire for an idealized existence.

4.1 Closed Chronotopes: Barriers and Dilemmas

On a physical level, the novel portrays several closed Chronotopes to reveal the communication barriers and existential dilemmas that Vasilii, as a fugitive, faces in a heterogeneous culture.

At the beginning of the novel, Vasilii wins a ticket for "a pleasure trip", while he has no desire to travel and wants to sell the ticket. However, the procedure is so complicated that he decides to join the trip. The night before the departure, he can not help but start imagining about the trip. "This happiness would have something in common with his childhood, and with the excitement aroused in him by Russian lyrical poetry..." (Nabokov, 1995) ^[9]. In the enclosed space of the room, Vasilii's fantasies about the trip are filled with memories of his native Russia. He feels hopeless at escaping, only being stranded there.

As the journey is about to start, Vasiliy's expectations are mixed with nostalgia, which is a reflection of the common reality of the exiles. Due to practical reasons, individuals can not cross the barrier of space, and they can only use memories to expand their living space as well as psychological space.

During the journey, Vasiliy and his companions stayed in "a tumble-down inn", where the post-office clerk "began to talk of his Russian adventures" ^[9]. In this enclosed space, the clerk's telling of Vasiliy's Russian experiences is a reawakening of Vasiliy's Russian memories. However, due to the difference in identity and experience, the communication between individuals in the inn space has an insurmountable barrier. The contrast between the crumbling inn in reality and the peaceful hometown in his memories reinforces Vasiliy's ideal pursuit of the peace and calm.

4.2 Path Chronotope: Reality and Ideal

From the social level, the novel focuses on the train as a path Chronotope, and promotes the process of Vasiliy's search for his ideal in the cruel reality through the transformation of the train's internal and external space. The train, as the most dominant metaphorical space, is of great significance to the development of the plot and the character's self-exploration. The internal and external spaces of the train expose the contradiction between reality and ideal.

Inside the train, fellow travelers taunt, and laugh at Vasiliy, asking him to sing German songs by himself. The food is distributed with jokes about Vasiliy bringing different food from the others. "The cucumber amused everybody, was pronounced inedible, and was thrown out of the window" ^[9]. The consistent unusual behaviour of fellow travelers makes the otherwise normal Vasiliy seem idiosyncratic. The stifling oppression of individuality by collectivism is presented sharply in the train. In addition, the travelers shout slogans of pleasure trip, but in reality, they harass Vasiliy at every turn, and even beat him up. The inconsistency shows the hypocrisy of this group of travelers, suggesting that collective violence is hidden beneath the seemingly good surface.

While depicting the interior of the train, the novel constantly intersperses scenes outside the train. The interaction of the two different Chronotopes emphasizes the brutal difference and difficulty of communion between ideal and reality. The space outside the train includes a series of depictions of idyllic Russian landscapes, which evoke Vasiliy's memories of homeland and his longing for the peace and tranquility. The suffocating space of the train's interior can only be compensated for by the memory space.

In the path Chronotope, the imagery of the train connects the ideal and the real, the beautiful and the cruel, symbolizing departure and escape, although the ending, in which Vasiliy is forced to return to reality, reflects the universal existential dilemma of the difficulty of escaping from reality.

4.3 The Idyllic Chronotope: Healing and Resistance

On a spiritual level, the novel heals Vasiliy's psychological space through an idyl Chronotope that blends the immediate view of the present with the remembered view of homeland.

"But just this one—in the inexpressible and unique harmoniousness of its three principal parts, in its smile, in some mysterious innocence it had, my love!" ^[9]. The scene, blending the cloud, castle and lake, becomes a connecting space that transcends time and space, bridging the immediate scene of the present with the remembered scene of homeland. Vasiliy is so impressed by this scene that he decides never to leave. The idyl Chronotope that Nabokov creates here heals Vasiliy's crippled psychological space under the sense of alienation from a heterogeneous culture. Bakhtin (2009) clearly states that "the Chronotope also determines (to a considerable extent) the image of the human being in literature" ^[10]. The role of the Chronotope is not only limited to the intersection of time and space, but also, more importantly, serves for the characters' images under the specific

metaphorical Chronotope. In the idyl Chronotope, Vasiliy, under the oppression and bullying of a heterogeneous culture, shows a strong desire for a place of serenity and defiance to the heterogeneous culture.

5. Conclusion

Nabokov's *Cloud, Castle, Lake* is a profound exploration of exile, memory, and the human yearning for an idealized existence. Through the protagonist Vasiliy's journey, Nabokov delves into the psychological and existential struggles of individuals displaced by cultural and geographical boundaries. The novel's layered narrative, blending reality and memory, reveals the tension between the harshness of the present and the tranquility of an idealized past. At its core, the work interrogates the universal human desire to escape alienation and find solace in a harmonious, timeless space.

Bakhtin's Chronotope Theory provides a powerful framework for analyzing the novel's intricate use of time and space. The closed chronotopes of Vasiliy's room and the inn highlight the barriers of communication and the existential dilemmas of exile. The train, as a path chronotope, juxtaposes the oppressive reality of collective violence with the idyllic landscapes of memory, emphasizing the contrast between the brutal reality and the idealized world. Finally, the idyllic chronotope of the cloud, castle, and lake transcends temporal and spatial boundaries, merging memory and reality to heal Vasiliy's psychological wounds and symbolize his resistance to a foreign culture. These chronotopes not only structure the narrative but also deepen its thematic resonance.

Through the analysis of these chronotopes, the novel's themes and character dynamics come into sharper focus. The closed spaces reveal Vasiliy's isolation and the limitations of memory as a refuge. The train chronotope exposes the hypocrisy of collective violence and the protagonist's alienation, while the idyllic chronotope offers a vision of healing and resistance. Together, these chronotopes illustrate Nabokov's masterful use of time and space to explore the complexities of exile, memory, and the human pursuit of an idealized existence. By applying Bakhtin's theory, this analysis underscores the significance of chronotopes in shaping the novel's structure, themes, and emotional depth, offering a nuanced understanding of Nabokov's artistic vision.

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