

Professor Wutz, Contemporary American Literature, English 4550, Spring 2016

Student Sample, The Scale of Time in *The Lowland*

In Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*, characters develop over a span of years of time from two different points of view. Sometimes the novel reads in the present moment, while at others it reflects back on Udayan's involvement, and eventual death, with the Naxalite movement. By this narrative form, the reader comes to know characters through long-term conditions and the different roles they play, such as child, sibling, spouse, parent, lover, and so forth. This span of years also allows readers to observe characters' interactions with time itself and their own perceptions through aging, regrets, decisions, actions, and so forth.

Some momentary characters give ideas of time passing and its fleeting nature versus a more permanent nature. For example, characters like Holly and Lorna are temporary lovers that fill some yearning or void for characters in the novel, while a character like Elise is a more permanent presence and represents a more stable period. Due to the long-term nature of the narrative, the reader is exposed to people and phases both temporary and more enduring.

In the case of Mr. and Mrs. Mitra, time begins to act as a cruel companion after the death of their son, Udayan. Mr. Mitra avoids the topic and attempts to move on as though it had not happened. He shares minor events of the night of Udayan's death without divulging information that Subhash actually wants to know, "I thought he'd quit the party," Subhash pressed. 'That he'd drifted away from it. Had he?' 'I was at home,' his father said, not acknowledging the question. 'When were you home?' 'That day. I opened the gate for them. I let them in.' 'Who?' 'The police'" (Lahiri 115). He is not presented showing much emotion beyond amiability and finishes out his existence in ultimate disappointment of the mockery his life is to him.

Mrs. Mitra, Bijoli, on the other hand, begins a slow and painful spiral into dementia when she loses her favorite son. Despite her daily pilgrimage to her son's grave-marker, Bijoli becomes stuck in the past events. She considers the water when she had first come to Tollygunge—clean, inviting, and even pretty. Now the remaining water is a ‘dull green’ that reminds her of ‘military vehicles’ (Lahiri 216). The remainder of the lowland is mud and garbage, though the water hyacinth still grows. Seasons, as they have worn away at the once beautiful pond, have worn away at her. Indeed, time is something she cannot take on anymore. She begins to clean out the lowland of the refuse that the scavengers do not want, and this tedious task becomes her sustaining activity, “Each day she removes a small portion of the unwanted things in people’s lives, though all of it, she thinks, was previously wanted, once useful...The task satisfies her. It passes the time” (Lahiri 228). However, even this task cannot keep dementia at bay for the afflicted mother. Later in the novel, she suffers a stroke and succumbs completely to the past that calls for her and begins to live, mentally, in a time that is easier to bear than the present, “It was unclear to Subhash, the degree to which his mother recognized him. She spoke to him in fragments, sometimes as if he were Udayan, or as if they were boys...He saw that his mother was dwelling in an alternate time, a more bearable reality” (Lahiri 267). Bijoli reacts to time by molding it to fit her needs and fill her empty space, a perpetual present that is easier to bear. The adaptation to this method likely contributed to her slow transition into dementia.

Bela’s development through years of time is set apart from Bijoli and other characters in the story because, from childhood into the beginnings of her own parenthood, she develops without the influencing knowledge of her real father’s death. Through the course of her journey, she experiences a distant mother who will eventually abandon her, a confusing truth about the

nature of her father, and the obtained conviction that she will never marry and subject herself to the misery she saw in her parents' marriage. Her first conceptions of time begin as a young girl, when she can only perceive time as 'yesterdays.' "At four Bela was developing a memory. The word *yesterday* entered her vocabulary, though its meaning was elastic, synonymous with whatever was no longer the case. The past collapsed, in no particular order, contained by a single word" (Lahiri 178). This note about Bela has significance in the fact that eventually all she has known does come to collapse, so it is interesting that she develops her interactions with the past at such an early age. She emerges as a different person on the other side of that destruction. Her life is laid out by birth, phases, and rebirths, as noted by Subhash "At times Bela's second birth felt more miraculous than the first. It was a miracle to him that she had discovered meaning her life. That she could be resilient, in the face of what Gauri had done. That in time she had renewed, if not fully restored, her affection for him" (Lahiri 274). Her life is a series of phases and moments; her childhood with a distant mother and adoptive father, her early adolescence without a mother at all and the conjecture that she was not worth staying for, her early adulthood with engagement in a cause, and her own journey into motherhood and the truth of her life. Her father, Subhash, thinks of her phase as a rebirth. Indeed, she comes out of her mother's abandonment a stronger person in some terms, and she comes out of the truth of her parentage with a deeper respect and love for Subhash. In all the moments of her rebirths, Bela comes out reinforced so that by the time she does meet a man to potentially condemn her warped views of love, she is ready to take on the challenge.

As for the brothers, Udayan and Subhash, both are concerned with the present moment for different reasons. Udayan channels his present actions around the preservation of a better future for his beloved country. Before he even gets involved in the Naxalite movement, the

reader can begin to infer that his life is lived on borrowed time. In the beginning of the novel, as the reader is getting to know the brothers better, the story of Udayan's footprints in the concrete is recalled. The young Udayan runs out before the concrete has dried and leaves his footprints to solidify in the mixture and remain there permanently, "Halfway across the plank he lost his balance, the evidence of his path forming impressions of the soles of his feet, tapering like an hourglass at the center, the pads of the toes disconnected" (Lahiri 13). Pointing out the hourglass shape of his feet and the disconnect of his toes is a reference to the passing of time and the conflicting interests this character is trying to juggle, and the reader can deduct, later, when Udayan dies an early death, that these hourglass footprints point to Udayan running out of time—the grains of sand slowly falling, collecting together and gaining speed as he furthers his involvement in so dangerous a cause. Udayan himself comes to fully comprehend the constant and quickly falling sands in his hourglass when he helps take the life of the policeman:

He'd known from the beginning what he was doing. But only the policeman's blood had prepared him. That blood had not belonged to only the police officer, it had become a part of Udayan also. So that he'd felt his own life begin to ebb, irrevocably, as the policeman lay dying in the alley. Since then he'd waited for his own blood to spill.
(Lahiri 414)

At that point, Udayan had become aware of the moving timepiece of his life, though the reader is not exposed to this self-realization of his until the final pages of the novel. Had the reader been exposed to his realization at the same time as he, the reader's own clock would be ticking for the certain time that Udayan's life is taken and thus skewed their own timeframe with which they read the novel. Though there are hints that Udayan's time will be cut short, this knowledge would have solidified it for the reader. It would go against the timeline with which Lahiri

designed the novel to be read, with information unveiling as is timely to her purposes. Though Udayan suddenly realizes that he is living and acting on borrowed time, his efforts for the future are too important to him to let go. In his efforts to sacrifice for a better tomorrow, he loses many of his todays to the call of the cause, and all that is left behind of him are his footprints in the concrete, as permanent as the damage he commits to those closest to him.

Like his brother, Subhash is also concerned with the immediate moments. However, he is not concerned with the present to act for a better future, but to simply make the most of it. He does as his parents say, he works a steady job to provide income, and he makes rash decisions for what he considers to be the right reasons. He considers the future, yes, but his nurturing nature enables him to make present decisions that he considers best for the people around him and the bigger picture. All his decisions are to ensure a basic life; to get an education, to start a family, and to get a steady job that enables him to take care of that family. However, as he gets older, he begins to question all the decisions he has made over a period of years. One day, later in his life, Subhash walks alone looking for a marker of a battle between a Narragansett tribe and a colonial militia. As he searches for this marker of some time and event long ago, he becomes aware of his own sense of loneliness and the perceived insignificance of his life, perhaps realizing that he would leave no marker of his own, “He’d been compelled, back then, to follow crude directions...But he had lost that confidence, that intrepid sense of direction. He felt only aware now that he was alone, that he was over sixty years old, and that he did not know where he stood” (Lahiri 296). The pattern of a human life rests greatly on the passing of time, and many partakers of life expect to reach landmarks of their existence; Subhash is no exception. It is the passing of years that makes him aware of his perceived failings. Subhash falls into this bleak outlook, perhaps, because he does not believe in the complete power of time. When Gauri leaves,

he does not believe that time will heal Bela from the scars of being abandoned, “It was not simply a matter of time before it mended, nor was it possible for him to set it right” (Lahiri 263). Time did not make Udayan grow out of his rebellious phase; time did not make Gauri love Subhash; and time did not make Gauri a better mother. Subhash learned to stop trusting in time to fix the decisions that people make, himself included. It may be because of this perspective that he considers his loneliness so bleak and complete at some points in the novel. His faith may be restored, however, when time does come to alter Bela to be able to handle her unusual life and when Subhash finally does find sincere romantic love.

The character that, understandably, takes the most interest in time is Gauri. She avoids pondering the present moment, in part, because she is trapped in the scarring experiences of her past. She comes to have an awareness of time passing that intrigues her and stimulates her study of time, claiming that it is her strongest image, both past and future. She considers her past to flow from the right, where she thinks of events in a mental bullet list with dates and facts. For example, the year she met Udayan and all the years before that when she had lived without knowing him. Before that is the year she was born, “...prefaced by all the years and centuries that had come before that” (Lahiri 132). To the left she contemplates her future. In this phase, she acknowledges her death, unknown in the details but certain in the outcome. Additionally, as she is pregnant with Bela when laying out her map of time, she knows that she will have a baby in the near future, whose life was already forming. She recognizes the ceasing existence of Udayan in her life, which would come to be replaced by a strange brother who, in her mind, she may or may not come to love. “Only the present moment, lacking any perspective, eluded her grasp. It was like a blind spot, just over her shoulder. A hole in her vision. But the future was visible, unspooling incrementally” (Lahiri 132). At this point in the novel, Bela feels no certainty

about her future and the new husband and coming child it holds. A pregnancy is not something she could easily stop once started, as seems true of most of the decisions that have led her to this point. She recognizes that time goes on without her consent, even if she feels like it is at a standstill, and she cannot grasp the present moment.

This fascination of time and space continues into both Gauri's studies and her perceptions of her life. She begins to measure her life in units of time. When she meets Subhash at the airport, now his new wife, she reflects that this is her second husband in two years. This awareness of time only gets stronger. One day, walking on the beach with Subhash, Gauri reflects on the footsteps she makes with him, "She looked back at the set of footprints they had made in the damp sand. Unlike Udayan's steps from childhood, which endured in the courtyard in Tollygunge, theirs were already vanishing, washed clean by the encroaching tide" (Lahiri 164). At this point, both Gauri and Subhash are hoping that she can come to form feelings for Subhash, but this scene on the beach suggests that their duration together will be fleeting and temporary, just as their footprints left on the sand. These impressions wash away quickly, unlike Udayan's permanent footprints in the concrete in Tollygunge.

Gauri's fascination with time then begins to turn into research. She explores the ideas of time as a sustenance, a product of the mind, or a physical substance. She examines how the past, present, and future coexist together. She questions how long the present is actually the present and acknowledges that, while the future acts as a motivator for most people, it haunts her. Her questions are probes to discover the workings of time in her own life, for the woman trapped in the past, at odds with her present, and distrusting of the future:

She saw time; now she sought to understand it. She filled notebooks with questions, observations. Did it exist independently, in the physical world, or in the mind's

apprehension? Was it perceived only by humans? What caused certain moments to swell up like hours, certain years to dwindle to a number of days? Did animals have a sense of it passing, when they lost a mate, or killed their prey? (Lahiri 180)

Gauri goes on to reflect on the Hindu philosophy of the three tenses of time. The past, present, and the future were thought to coexist simultaneously in God. This perception holds fascination for Gauri because of its certain truth in her own life. Her troubled past and intimidating future lead her current actions just as much, if not more so, than her actual present moment, thus coexisting simultaneously in their battle to win over her attention. She also recognizes that, on earth, time is marked by the sun and moon with human developments of calendars and clocks to apply meaning to the rotations of the earth. Studying time and its meaning in terms of physical earth and structure was more understandable a task than understanding time in the workings of her own life, for she did not know what to measure it by or how to escape its taunts and confusion. She studies Newton, whose theories on time as an entity, and Einstein's contribution of the intertwining of space and time, were jotted in notes in Udayan's hand. All of these reflections lead her to consider her own relation to time and its tenses, "The future haunted her but kept her alive; it remained her sustenance and also her predator" (Lahiri 181). The past remains something she does not want to acknowledge but has vivid memories of, so the elapsed events seem recent and pressing. At this point, Gauri's perceptions are still all about futures and yesterdays, and the present remains a specter and spectrum that she cannot acquaint herself with (Lahiri 180-182).

Lahiri narrows Gauri's study of time in bringing up specific philosophers, such as Friedrich Nietzsche and Arthur Schopenhauer and their concepts of circular time (Lahiri 198). When considering some of the theories of the two philosophers, it becomes clear why this

hurting woman is drawn to them. Both examined the concept of time and came to considerable conclusions. Arthur Schopenhauer counsels on the very topic with which Gauri personally struggles, the present moment:

The greatest wisdom is to make the enjoyment of the present the supreme object of life: because that is the only reality, all else being merely the play of thought. On the other hand, such a course might just as well be called the greatest folly: for that which in the next moment exists no more, and vanishes utterly, like a dream, can never be worth a serious effort. (Greatest Wisdom)

As previously quoted, Gauri struggles continuously throughout the novel to see the present moment. When initially studying Schopenhauer's theories, she misses the greatest wisdom by not making it her priority to enjoy the present moment. However, later in the novel, at least for a moment, Gauri comes to absorb the present instant, "She closed her eyes. Her mind was blank. It held only the present moment, nothing else. The moment that, until now, she'd never been able to see. She thought it would be like looking directly at the sun. But it did not deflect her" (Lahiri 396). In this moment of insight, contemplating suicide on a balcony in India, she finally comes face-to-face with the present moment and fulfills, by Schopenhauer's standard, the greatest wisdom. Perhaps this confrontation is what bids her step back from the balcony and preserve her life. However, in the next breath of Schopenhauer's theory on time, he questions the practice of living in the present moment due to its incredibly brief, if not non-existent, nature. The peace, however, that Gauri feels in taking that moment to release all of the pain from her life contradicts the latter part of Schopenhauer's theory and suggests that there is value in living in the present moment, a realization that takes Gauri a painful lifetime to uncover.

Friedrich Nietzsche, to whom Gauri compared Schopenhauer's theories, said, "Time, space, and causality are only metaphors of knowledge, with which we explain things to ourselves" (azquotes). Gauri reflects on many of the trials and events she has undergone in terms of time. As previously discussed, her map of time reads from the right, her past, to the left, her future. She deliberates all the events of her life on that scale of time, and it is the method by which she comes to understand what has happened to her, or at least to cope with it.

It is speculating to say that Lahiri considered her character, Gauri, coming across these exact quotes in her studies; however, it can be said with certainty that Lahiri intended for Gauri to be aware of the philosophies existing in these quotes. Her life, as a young woman, changed so often and so quickly, that she had to engage in extensive study of time simply to understand it. She fell in love quickly. She became an instrument to murder quickly. She lost her new husband quickly. Before she knew it, she was in America with another new husband and a baby girl. Only a few brief years after that, she was alone, as she was in the beginning when the reader is first exposed to her, "From wife to widow, from sister-in-law to wife, from mother to childless woman...Layering her life only to strip it bare, only to be alone in the end" (Lahiri 291). There was little time for her to process any of the layers of life that were happening to her, so she processed her own life through the study of time and its concepts through philosophers such as Schopenhauer and Nietzsche.

While time is considered in the novel with many beginnings and endings, it does come full circle in the end. Pregnant Bela returns home to Subhash without the father of the unborn child there to offer up any help, "The coincidence coursed through him, numbing, bewildering. A pregnant woman, a fatherless child. Arriving in Rhode Island, needing him. It was a reenactment of Bela's origins. A version of what had brought Gauri to him, years ago" (Lahiri 322). This

circumstance finally prompts Subhash to tell Bela the truth about her origins. Confronting this albatross causes Subhash to ponder on the effects of a new generation, “The presence of another generation within her was forcing a new beginning, also demanding an end” (Lahiri 324). In the end, Subhash does not give Bela enough credit in worrying that she will never come back to him after learning the truth of her parentage, yet she returns to her adoptive father with even more love than she had for him before. In this sense, the novel comes full circle in returning to the intense love that she had always had for him.

A reflection of Gauri’s brings the novel’s circular time into perspective, “At every moment the past is there, appended to the present. It’s a version of Bela’s definition, in childhood, of yesterday” (Lahiri 335). The novel comes full circle because the past never actually separates from the present. The main characters’ pasts are poignant enough to be critical to the formation of their present moments. The ultimate concept of circular time comes into play as the novel ends how it began: with the brothers. Thus, the entire novel itself, how it is written and how the reader is led to perceive it, functions on circular time in a format that allows readers a full-picture look into time and the levels and depths in which it functions.

Works Cited

Friedrich Nietzsche Quotes About Time | A-Z Quotes." *A-Z Quotes*. N.p., n.d. Web. 15 Apr. 2016.

"GREATEST WISDOM Quotes." *Like Success*. N.p., n.d. Web. 15 Apr. 2016.

Lahiri, Jhumpa. *The Lowland*. New York: Vintage Contemporaries: A Division of Random House LLC, 2013. Print.