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The Meaning of Numbers in Cloud Atlas

Cloud Atlas by David Mitchell uses numbers in many ways. The numbers six, three and twelve are the most prominent numbers used in the novel. Six is used with particular frequency. There are six stories loosely connected to each other and in each, characters from different societal backgrounds remark on civilization as they see it. They all deal with the savagery of civilization in their own way and succeed in finding stability in their lives. Each character alone tells a hopeful story and they come together to tell an overarching story of hope for a stable society that does not have to resort to savagery for survival.

In mathematics, six is a perfect number meaning that the sum of the numbers that are divisible by six add up to six. Cloud Atlas is the sum of its parts. When all of the stories come together, they can be seen as a statement on the savagery within civilization. Apart, each story is hopeful and each character overcomes the savagery in their civilization. Individually, they do not make a big difference in the world, but together the small changes they make affect each other. At the end of the book Ewing states: “… your life amounted to no more than one drop in a limitless ocean!’ yet what is any ocean but a multitude of drops?” (509). Individual drops come together to form an unstoppable ocean. Each story is a drop of water that joins with other drops for strength. The ocean represents the strength to overcome the savagery that threatens to destroy civilization.
Each drop is vital for success against savagery and slavery. If one fails to join this ocean of resistance, the resistance will ultimately fail.

The first story in the book is the journal of a man named Adam Ewing. The use of the name Adam suggests the first man on the earth according to Christianity. This means that Adam is the beginning of a journey to discovery. He touches off the quest to find freedom from slavery and the savagery that accompanies it. Adam is a special man because he holds on to hope in whatever circumstances he has to live in:

If we believe that humanity may transcend tooth & claw, if we believe divers races & creeds can share this world as peaceably as the orphans share their candlenut tree, if we believe leaders must be just, violence muzzled, power accountable & the riches of the Earth and its Oceans shared equitably, such a world will come to pass (508).

Adam has so much hope in humanity that he feels belief has the power to change the world. He has the will to work for change. Once hope and belief are in place, it is easier to act on those feelings. Adam will fight for the abolition of slaves when he returns home to San Francisco. He is the foundation for everyone who comes after him. The hope he exudes will never leave Mitchell’s story and the characters in the stories that follow. He is an important part of Cloud Atlas; a part of the whole just like the parts that make the number six a perfect number.

Sonmi-451 is another character whose name has special meaning. The number attached to her name suggests that she is one of many, a fraction of the whole. She is not allowed to be an individual. The number attached to her name along with the fact that she is a fabricant and looks exactly likes every other Sonmi in Nea So Copros suggests
that she is not meant to be anything more than a slave that has been duplicated many
times over. The problem with duplicating something too many times is that eventually,
there will be some imperfections. For Sonmi-451, the imperfection that surfaces is the
ability to learn and retain knowledge. Even though she is a slave, she is able to rise
above her station and take on the corpocracy that enslaves society. When Sonmi-451 is
asked by her interviewer why she takes Nea So Copros on, she answers: “As Seneca
warned Nero: No matter how many of us you kill, you will never kill your successor”
(349). She joins the ocean of resistance with a new view. It is important for each
color in Mitchell’s book to join the resistance, but even if they fail there will be
someone else who will come and try to carry on the resistance. It is a never-ending cycle.
There cannot be an end just because a perfect number has been reached with six
successful stories of overcoming slavery within society. Anything that has been created
can also be destroyed. The number 451 is the temperature at which books burn, as Ray
Bradbury pointed out in his novel *Fahrenheit 451*. Books are a way of spreading
knowledge and no matter what form books might take in the future, they are needed to
create resistance against a society that wishes to enslave its inhabitants. The part that
Sonmi-451 takes in spreading the knowledge of resistance is important to the future. She
is an insignificant fraction that rises above her station and changes the world.

Meronym is another character who is a fraction. According to the Webster
Dictionary, meronym means “a word that names a part of a larger whole.” Meronym is a
part of the sixth story and the final part that creates the whole. She has no illusions of her
importance in the world. She even tells Zachry: “I ain’t here to play Lady Sonmi ev’ry
time sumthin’ bad happ’ns an’ click my fingers’n make it right! I’m jus’ human, Zachry,
like you, like anyun!” (267). Meronym may just be human, but she is important and she can make a difference. She saves Catkin’s life by giving her medicine that no one else can give the young girl. She also saves Zachry’s life by taking him away from slavery and helping him find his new life away from the savagery of his old life. He is also able to have a family that will carry on the tradition of a peaceful civilization. Meronym is a part of a larger whole. She is a part of Zachry and she makes it possible for him to have a family.

One of the most important evidences of the importance of the number six in *Cloud Atlas* is the musician Robert Frobisher’s piece of music that he calls the Cloud Atlas Sextet. For Frobisher, music is the most important part of his life. When he talks about his music he is talking about what is in his soul. In one of his many letters to his friend Sixsmith he describes his sextet:

> . . . piano, clarinet, ’cello, flute, oboe, and violin, each in its own language of key, scale, and color. In the first set, each solo is interrupted by its successor: in the second, each interruption is recontinued, in order. Revolutionary or gimmicky? Shan’t know until it’s finished, and by then it’ll be too late, but it’s the first thing I think of when I wake, and the last thing I think of before I fall asleep, even if J. is in my bed. She should understand, the artist lives in two worlds (445).

Each character in *Cloud Atlas* has a unique voice. Even the style of writing changes with each story, corresponding with Frobisher’s sextet. Each story has some connection to the other stories. Since six is a perfect number, using six instruments that seem to fight against each other, but in the end compliment each other and add depth and individuality
to the piece, is important for the cohesion of the music. Frobisher himself is an important character because he is a creator. He introduces the idea of the number six as an important feature to the book with his sextet. In Adam Ewing’s journal, the idea of fractions is introduced because his story is cut of mid-sentence to move on to Frobisher’s story. Frobisher is a fraction of the whole who explains the structure of the novel. His music is an attempt at something new, very much like the general structure of Mitchell’s novel. It resolves itself with a final note horribly played, suggesting that this fraction of the whole has not yet found a balance. Frobisher commits suicide to escape the oppression of his life. He sees himself as a man trapped by life and his music gives him the freedom to express himself. His freedom from slavery is the freedom to decide what to do with his life once he has achieved what he sees to be the purpose of his life. His suicide gives him freedom.

Rufus Sixsmith connects Frobisher’s story to the story that follows it: *Half-Lives: The First Luisa Rey Mystery*. Sixsmith is immediately an important character because of his name, which contains the number six. He does not seem very important in Frobisher’s story because he is an invisible person that the musician addresses his letters to. His solidification as a real person in the next story makes him particularly important because he is the only minor character to have a major presence in more than one story. He is the confidant of Frobisher and in turn he confides in Rey to get his story out to the public:

*Tell her.* Sixsmith opens his mouth to tell her everything—the whitewashing at Seaboard, the blackmailing, the corruption—but without warning the elevator lurches, rumbles, and resumes its descent. Its
occupants squint in the restored light, and Sixsmith finds his resolve has crumbled away (96).

Sixsmith is the only scientist out of twelve to refuse to back Seaboard because he knows that the company could cause a nuclear war if the project they are working on is allowed to move forward. He fails to tell Rey what happens, but he does leave the paper trail for her to find that will help her to bring Seaboard down. He may have seemed like an unimportant, disembodied figure early on, but once he becomes a real person with secrets and a real life, he becomes an important drop in Ewing’s ocean of resistance. It is left to Rey to put the pieces together, but his place in the fight against slavery is as solid as his sudden appearance in Rey’s story.

Luisa Rey’s story is important in the fight against slavery because it shows how people can allow themselves to be enslaved. Seaboard primarily enslaves their employees through blackmail and fear. They use the assassin Bill Smoke to get rid of anyone who disagrees with them. Alberto Grimaldi, the CEO of Seaboard, ponders the question of power and the reason some people have it while others find themselves enslaved:

Yet how is it some men attain mastery over others while the vast majority live and die as minions, as livestock? The answer is a holy trinity. First: God-given gifts of charisma. Second: the discipline to nurture these gifts to maturity, for though humanity’s topsoil is fertile with talent, only one seed in ten thousand will every flower—for want of discipline. Third: the will to power (129).
Grimaldi introduces another important number in *Cloud Atlas*. As he points out, three is the number of the holy trinity. In Christianity this means that God the Father, his son Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit are three people who are one and the same. Grimaldi twists this Christian belief to his own devices so that he can justify his search for power. Once he combines charisma, discipline and will as one, Grimaldi can gain the power he searches for. He would consider Rey and people like her a part of the livestock. Since she is trying to defy Seaboard, she has to be captured and killed by Bill Smoke so that Grimaldi can keep a hold on the power he has already attained. He realizes that once in a while there are people who try to break away from the pack, but his will to power is greater than Rey’s will to take the power away. She will succumb to death and he will retain his power. The only problem is that he does not realize that he has to protect the power he has attained. There will always be someone to fight against him. Rey will fight against him, but other people who hunger after power will also fight him and try to transfer the power to themselves. His inability to retain his power proves that he does not have the discipline he needs. His greed and his complacency are his downfall.

Unlike Grimaldi, the number three for Timothy Cavendish is a good number that restores his faculties to him. It takes Cavendish three days to wake up from his stroke and regain his memory. It took three days for Christ to resurrect after his crucifixion with all of the faculties he had in life. Cavendish is still dependent on nurses to help him, but he improves rapidly and is eventually able to regain complete control of all his faculties. Cavendish himself is aware of the reason for providing three awakenings:

>I offer that trio of vignettes for the benefit of lucky readers whose psyches have never been razed to rubble by capillaries rupturing in their brains.
Putting Timothy Cavendish together again was a Tolstoyan editing job, even for a man who once condensed the nine-volume *Story of Oral Hygiene on the Isle of Wight* to a mere seven hundred pages. Memories refused to fit, or fitted but came unglued. Even months later, how would I know if some major tranche of myself remained lost? (354).

As an editor, Cavendish is well aware of many ploys used by authors and he is not shy about utilizing them and telling everyone that he’s using them. Memories are an important part in the construction of a human being. Without memory, there is nothing. There is only instinct. Cavendish cannot fight against his captors in the retirement home without his memories. His stroke took away his ability to do anything for himself, but his memories are the first thing that he has to get back and they are the most important. If he is going to escape from this living hell, he will have to fight the effects of his stroke and his memories help him fight to regain control of the rest of his faculties.

Cavendish fights for his freedom from the slavery of complacency in a retirement home where everyone does as they are told, waiting for nurses and doctors to do things for them and waiting for uncaring family members to come and visit them. Age is a coded slavery that stems from the fear of death. Age is frightening because the physical effects of age are very prominent and reminds youthful people of the physical breakdown that will soon grab them and drag them down to death. Retirement homes are often provided not for the aged, but for the youth who are afraid to look at age. Cavendish has plenty of life left inside of him. Youths do not realize that they are giving into fear and creating for themselves and eventual enslavement for themselves. Cavendish says this:
Middle age is flown, but it is attitude, not years, that condemns one to the ranks of the Undead, or else proffers salvation. In the domain of the young there dwells many an Undead soul. They rush about so, their inner putrefaction is concealed for a few decades, that is all (387).

Youth runs about ignoring the fact that they will soon age and eventually die. The knowledge is always there and it is impossible to really escape. Accepting the things that cannot be changed is a part of finding freedom from slavery. Age is something that cannot be changed. Cavendish breaks from the pack with his friends when he escapes from the retirement home by proving that a person can have an adventure at any age. A person does not have to be at his or her physical peak in order to enjoy life. Cavendish needed help for a little while after he had a stroke, but once he recovered from his illness, he could do anything that other people could do. He is a great drop in the ocean of resistance against the wrongs of slavery in society.

Slavery to age is most prominent in Sonmi-451’s story. People do not allow themselves to age in her Sonmi-451’s world. They take drugs that cut their lives short before they suffer the ravages of age. She lives in a society that is enslaved by consumerism. Disease is a part of the aging process and there are pills in the Corpocracy to prevent the signs of age. The drugs available in this world go deeper than age. They are used to forget about all the troubles that come with life. Money is used to buy happiness, and money has to be spent. Money itself is not happiness, but consumerism is. When Sonmi-451 visits a galleria she describes some of the ways people spend their money:
A pharmacy: packets of pills for cancer, aids, alzheimers, lead-tox; for corpulence, anorexia, baldness, hairiness, exuberance, glumness, dewdrugs, drugs for overindulgence in dewdrugs. Hour twenty-one chimed, yet we had not advanced beyond a single precinct. How consumers seethed to buy, buy, buy! Purebloods, it seemed, were a sponge of demand that sucked goods and services from every vendor, dinery, bar, shop, and nook (227).

The escape these consumers seek goes beyond age. They want to escape from the harshness of life. Anything difficult has to be avoided. Sonmi-451 herself was once a consumer good as a fabricant. She was merely used by purebloods. They never gave her a second thought. There was no reason for them to think about her. She was a fabricant whose memory was erased at the end of every day. Without memory she is less than human. It is easy to ignore a common commodity. Now that she has become a prescient creature, Sonmi-451 is difficult to ignore. She is the sort of thing that the corpocracy is trying to avoid. The purebloods do not realize that buying into a society of over-commercialization makes them a commodity themselves. They are the commodity the corpocracy needs to sustain the civilization they have created. Without someone to buy goods to forget about the difficulties that life brings, there is no corpocracy.

Fabricants themselves are an example of age being a detriment to the futuristic society they live in. They are only allowed to live for twelve years. After twelve years, they are slaughtered and recycled. Sonmi-451 calls it:

The economics of corpocracy. The genomics industry demands huge quantities of liquefied biomatter, for wombtanks, but most of all, for Soap.
What cheaper way to supply this protein than by recycling fabricants who have reached the end of their working lives? Additionally, leftover “reclaimed proteins” are used to produce Papa Songs food products, eaten by consumers in the corp’s dineries all over Nea So Copros. It is a perfect food cycle (343).

The number twelve is a sublime number, meaning that “the sum of the number and the number of its divisors are both perfect” (“Sublime Numbers”). For a number to be sublime suggests that the number is very special and has good connotations. It should transcend the norm. In this case, it is used as an economic reality that is horrifying. The butchery of fabricants after twelve years is lauded as a “perfect food cycle,” mocking perfection. In corpocracy, perfection is efficiency. It does not matter that efficiency may be dirty or morally disturbing. Sonmi-451 brings the disturbing butchery to the knowledge of the general public. It is her contribution to the end of slavery.

To fight the corpocracy, Sonmi-451 creates her own sublime number of Declarations which condemn the government that enslaves everyone from purebloods with commercialism to fabricants by wiping their memories and butchering them like cattle. Sonmi-451’s Declarations are important in fighting against slavery. One of the important elements in fighting against slavery is to have a foundation of ideals to counter the foundation of slavery. The Declarations provide this foundation. Sonmi-451 looks beyond her own life into the future. She has hope that her Declarations will influence someone to join the ocean of resistance and succeed against corpocracy in finding a better life. Sonmi-451 says:
We see a game beyond the endgame. I refer to my *Declarations*, Archivist. Media has flooded Nea So Copros with my Catechisms. Every schoolchild in corpocracy knows my twelve “blasphemies” now. My guards tell me there is even talk of a statewide “Vigilance Day” against fabricants who show signs of the *Declarations*. My ideas have been reproduced a billionfold (349).

When information is reproduced on a massive level, there will eventually be someone who questions the validity of the information. Sonmi-451’s *Declarations* are reproduced so that everyone in corpocracy can see how terrible and evil they are, but at some point, someone will study them and decide that the ideals held in them are sound. They will encourage people to break away from corpocracy and fight against the slavery of commercialism.

The fruits of Sonmi-451’s work are seen in the central story of *Cloud Atlas*: *Sloosha’s Crossin’ an’ Ev’rythin’ After*. Sonmi has become a god to Zachry and his people. She is mentioned often throughout the story as an important figure in the lives of these simple people. On page 266, Zachry mentions almost idly: “Jonas was gone prayin’ to Sonmi at the Icon’ry.” Even though life does not have the complexities of an industrialized society for Zachry’s people, they are happy. They accept old age as an inevitability and death is an everyday part of their lives. They have everything Sonmi-451’s world did not have. They have difficult lives and they have to fight everyday for survival, but they are a largely happy people who are not slaves to anyone. They still have to fight against the people who would enslave them, but they are strong. Society does not have to be complex in order to be complete. Once Zachry and Meronym escape
the people who wish to enslave them, they live out their lives in peace. Their lives are not complex. They fight to survive by living off of the land. They do not have to have power over anyone else. They all work together to survive. It is easier to live happily and without slavery when society is not complex. There are fewer opportunities for someone working for survival to lord over someone else. Sonmi’s *Declarations* made all of this possible in Zachry’s post apocalyptic universe. She is the catalyst of this uncomplicated society where people can live in peace and where technology is only useful if it can help people to survive.

Mitchell’s novel uses a complex structure to explain a simple overarching story of overcoming different types of slavery for a reason. In an essay he wrote about structure, Mitchell says:

> When devising a complex structure for a piece of fiction it is wise to keep the question “Why am I telling the story this way?” in the front of your mind. If the answer is, “Because this structure develops the plot, enhances the character or helps me to explore the themes,” then things are looking good. . . But if you’re only doing it because you can, then you’re in trouble (“Playing with Structure”).

The use of numbers and narrative interruptions may be complex, but there is a simple reason for the use of these complexities. The complexity of the narrative enhances the differences between the freedom of an uncomplicated society and the increased avenues of slavery in complicated societies. It helps to develop this important theme in an interesting way that may not have been explored with the same subtlety in another form. It takes six stories and the lives of six people along with the help of their friends to
discover the secret to freedom, which is to live a simple life. Since six is a perfect number and is used consistently throughout *Cloud Atlas*, this is another complexity that is easily explored and adds depth to fight against slavery.

The first story of a simple society that Mitchell talks about is that of the Moriori. They are a peaceful people who are enslaved by all the societies that invade their land and take them over, including the Maori and the Europeans. The Moriori treasure peace more than anything else. ““Embrace your enemy,” the elders urged, “to prevent him striking you”” (14-15). This is a powerful moral, but it does not work in the face of enemies who have no compunctions about murdering the people they are looking to enslave. Even if peace is the ideal, it is not always possible. There will always be someone who wants to take power and enslave people with less conviction to take power. This example is shown at the beginning to give warning that it is not enough to be content with whatever peace a society has achieved. Adaptation is important and the will to fight for freedom is important. Complacency leads to slavery. An ocean of resistance is never complacent. It is always churning and ready for a fight.

The importance of individuals fighting for their freedoms and never giving up on their ideals, even though they might have to bend the rules society puts in place for them is exemplified in a poem by Emerson that is quoted in Luisa Rey’s story:

> If the red slayer thinks he slays,
> Or if the slain think he is slain
> They know not well the subtle ways
> I keep, and pass and turn again. . .
They reckon ill who leave me out;
When me they fly, I am the wings;
I am the doubter and the doubt,
And I the hymn the Brahmin sings (433).

The individual characters are not just drops in an ocean of resistance; they are also the wings of a bird that is able steer society with their doubts about the people who hold power and the enslavement that power brings. Without wings, a bird cannot fly. Powerful societies need doubters who will point the direction in which a society will fly. It only takes a fraction of people who are willing to steer. Those who hold power do not realize their reliance on doubters will cause their downfall until it is too late. The corpocracy needs Sonmi-451 to write her Declarations so they can spell out what is right and what is wrong. Slaves are needed in Adam Ewing’s time because manual labor has to be performed by someone. Frobisher has to kill himself so that the only testament to his life is his cloud atlas sextet. If he does not, then he might live long enough to see his brilliance fade and his music would become commonplace. Sixsmith is needed to confirm the lies Seaboard tells about their project so they can fool the public. When he fails, he has to be murdered and all evidence of his disharmony with the corporation has must be destroyed. Cavendish has to be placed in a retirement home to confirm the myth that old age is nothing but a terrible burden. Every character defies their place in society and steers the wings society in a new direction. Every piece is important and all six come together to create a society that is whole. The fight against slavery in society is never-ending, but it is worth it.
Mitchell uses a complex structure that involves the importance of various numbers to create a novel that discusses the struggle to balance society and create true freedom within civilization. It is a hopeful story that tells the struggle of various characters to overcome different types of slavery in their lives and ultimately every character is able to come to their own resolution within the society they live in to find freedom and peace of mind. It is a constant struggle that is never won. Every individual has to find their own purpose in life in order to free themselves from slavery.
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