

Shakespeare and the Unreality of Time: Embedding Shakespearean Plays in the Time Theory

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ABSTRACT

“Yesterday’s future was today and Tomorrow’s past is today” – seems to be logic but carries the biggest lie that time is unreal. This paper concentrates on the unreality of time, especially on the B Time Theory. To prove this theory Some of Shakespeare’s plays are analyzed in this paper and gives the solution how Shakespeare has followed the B Time Theory. The paper highlights that there is no such concept as time and therefore time is unreal and it is an illusion

KEYWORDS

Time theory; Unreality of Time; Shakespeare.

Aristotle’s theory of the three unities claims that a play should clinch unto the unities of action, time and place. Unity of action means that a play should follow one plot, without winding off into subplots. Unity of time means that a play should take place within a 24-hour period, and unity of place means that a play should take place in one spot and not shift from place to place. Shakespeare repeatedly violated the three unities by including subplots in his plays, by writing plays that spanned more than 24 hours and by having scenes in his plays take place in different spots. On the other hand, Johnson defends Shakespeare by saying that he does follow unity of action by writing plays that have a clear beginning, middle and end. Johnson said that, as for time and place, people are aware that they are watching a play and can easily adjust to different times and places. Once people engage artistically, they can continue to do so.

J.M.E Mc Taggart, a Cambridge philosopher developed a theory called ‘The Unreality of Time’ in which he describes time is unreal and it is an illusion. He claims that the position of time is distinguished into two groups and he named them as A- Series, and B-Series, which is also known as A Time Theory and B Time Theory.

A Series: It explains that each position is either, past, present, or future. It includes properties which are temporary rather than permanent. If an event is present, it will not always be present.

B Series: It explains that properties are earlier than or later than another event. It includes properties which are permanent rather than temporary. If A is earlier than B, it always will be.

Mc Taggart’s argument of the unreality of time has got the following structures:

1. If time is real, then something must be in the present, past or in future

2. The properties of the present, the past, and the future involve contradiction and hence time is an unreal one.
3. Therefore, time is not real, it is an illusion.

Further, Mc Taggart argues that time is impossible without change and change involves necessarily in A series.

Deliberately or accidentally Shakespearean plays have found its time progression in the theory of unreality. It automatically makes the readers and the critics to think, even in the Elizabethan period, Shakespeare has thought about time theory. Some of his plays fit into this theory of unreality of time and they are *Othello*, *Macbeth*, *Antony and Cleopatra*. Shakespeare has been accused of not handling the three unities but according to the 'Unreality of Time', there is no such element called 'time'.

For example, consider *Macbeth* for B-Series, The three witch prophecy Macbeth and Banquo.

MACBETH. Speak, if you can: What are you?

FIRST WITCH. All hail, Macbeth hail to thee, thane of Glamis!

SECOND WITCH. All hail, Macbeth hail to thee, thane of cawdor!

THIRD WITCH. All hail, Macbeth thou shalt be king hereafter!

(*Macbeth* 1.3 49-52)

In the above conversation, the word 'hereafter' plays a vital role in attesting the B Time Theory. The word 'hereafter' implies the time i.e., it indicates the future tense. The future is predicted but the precision is not mentioned in the play. Forever, the conversation indicates the future and the event stands here as an event of the later. The three witches foretelling Macbeth that he would become King. They talk about the later event in the present scenario which everlastingly represents the future. Here the future becomes a static one. Similarly in

'Othello' Iago's plan in the first act reveals the futuristic tone of time.

IAGO. To get his place and to plume up my will

In double knavery--How, how?
Let's see:--

After some time, to abuse Othello's ear

That he is too familiar with his wife.

He hath a person and a smooth dispose (*Othello* 1.3 330)

Likewise in the same play *Othello*, Bianca chides Cassio for leaving her alone.

BIANCA. And I was going to your lodging, Cassio.

What, keep a week away? Seven days and nights?

Eight score eight hours? And lovers' absent hours

More tedious than the dial eightscore times!

Oh weary reckoning!

(*Othello* 3.4 160-164)

On inspecting these two conversations, Shakespeare has carefully handled the words so as to indicate the time. In the dialogue spoken by Iago, one could see the word 'after some time' which points out the future and the word denotes the uncertainty of time. At some point, at some time Iago's intention is to intoxicate the mind of Othello with suspicion. The word 'after some time' is a prediction of the future tense. It is not clearly given when it would happen. But it signifies the action would take place later. Hence the theory of unreality of time establishes itself in the play. The above-mentioned examples prove the B series of the unreality of time concept.

The conversation of Bianca contradicts to the above mentioned B Series examples. The theory clearly states that all the events that denote the tenses are temporary. Here

Bianca explains that she left Cassio a week before, and clearly specifies it is seven days and nights. Since the dialogue has been found directly in the past tense, it falls into the category of A Time Theory. A time theory focuses the time on the basis of tense, therefore, it a temporary sector.

The two arguments propounded by Mc Taggart are proved and however, the third argument is the foremost foundation for Shakespeare to attain a lot of criticism. Shakespeare has violated three unities especially the unity of time. The third argument put forth by Mc Taggart also echoes over time as 'Time is an illusion'. For example in *Othello* and *Antony and Cleopatra*, the concept of time seems to be illogic. In *Othello*, the first act takes place in Athens and the second act takes place in Cyprus. Similarly in *Antony and Cleopatra*, in Act 3 the scene 7

takes place in Actium and then the Eleventh scene takes place in Alexandria and the twelfth scene takes place in Egypt. In both these plays, Shakespeare did not portray the time taken for travelling from one place to another place. It seems to be illogic to the readers and the audience but according to the B Time Theory, there is no such concept called time. It is the mind that places the time according to the tenses. Time is always a stationary aspect in which the events are placed in tenses by the human mind. As the mind has the capacity to place the events in the tenses, the Shakespearean audience has the mind to accept and adopt the transferring of the scenes from one place to another. Therefore the accusation executed on Shakespeare for violating the unity of time cannot be accepted by the 'B Time Theory'.

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