

UCLA

Departmental Honors Theses

Title

Revisiting the Twenties: Anachronism in American Fiction Narrative Structures

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1wt7b6j4>

Author

Voelkel, Olivia

Publication Date

2025-04-28

Undergraduate

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, LOS ANGELES

REVISITING THE TWENTIES: ANACHRONISM IN AMERICAN FICTION NARRATIVE
STRUCTURES

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO

THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS

BY

OLIVIA VOELKEL

ADVISOR: SARAH KAREEM

LOS ANGELES, CA

APRIL 28, 2025

ABSTRACT

REVISITING THE TWENTIES: ANACHRONISM IN AMERICAN FICTION NARRATIVE
STRUCTURES

BY OLIVIA VOELKEL

This thesis argues that the literary works of 1920s, Jean Toomer's *Cane* and Willa Cather's *The Professor's House*, uses nonchronological structural narratives and concurrent spaces and timelines to portray human consciousness and the reality of the human experience. I discuss literary critics and philosophers, such as Georg Lukacs and Gerard Genette, and their theoretical concepts of anachronies and nonlinearity to understand how I apply anachronism to nonchronological or temporally-ambiguous structures in a narrative and what particular effect this has on the novel as a whole. I apply the term anachronism to a particular method of structuring a narrative—structural anachronism—by looking at vignettes or nonchronological segments within a narrative form, as well as the artistic act of structuring of the narrative in the 1920s (analyzing the larger themes and meanings from the author and historical period). Moreover, I ground my analysis with the work of Mikhail Bakhtin and of the chronotope, applying a similar understanding of Bakhtin's rhetoric to the structure, as well as reviewing the sociopolitical and economic context of when these novels were written. Jean Toomer and Willa Cather's novels therefore characterize ways to try and understand what it is like to live in the 1920s by reevaluating methods of organizing narrative structures.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	4
Structural Anachronism.....	6
Nonlinearity in Narratives.....	8
The Era of Many Titles.....	9
Bakhtin's Chronotope.....	10
<i>Cane</i>	14
<i>The Professor's House</i>	22
The Cliff City.....	26
Cather: <i>On Writing</i>	29
Reflections and remarks.....	35
Additional remarks and notes.....	37
Works cited.....	39
Works consulted.....	43
Further reading.....	44

Introduction

The early twentieth century saw many artists experimenting with non-linear narrative. Where Salvador Dali warped reality in his paintings and the young Louis Armstrong experimented with syncopated sounds, writers like William Faulkner, Sherwood Anderson, Willa Cather, and more experimented with literary structure. More specifically, writers from this period experimented with the representation of time in narrative: one way that they did this was through the use of anachronism.

Anachronism is a term that means different things in different contexts. In this thesis, I use the term anachronism to refer to a particular literary strategy whereby a writer allows “characters to express feelings and thoughts about real, historical relationships in a much clearer way than the actual men and women of the time could have done” (Lukacs 69). This is the type of anachronism that the critic Georg Lukacs described as “necessary” ; necessary because it does a service, by allowing a fictional work’s protagonists “to discern historical relations inconceivable, or at best obscure, to those who lived the actual events,” as the critic Joseph Luzzi characterizes Lukacs’ approach (Lukacs 69; Luzzi 71, respectively). Luzzi observes in “The Rhetoric of Anachronism” that the word anachronism, “[f]irst used in English in 1669 (it appeared a century earlier in Italy)[,]...derives from a fusion of the Greek compound meaning ‘late in time’ ” (71). Describing both Goethe and Hegel’s ideas about anachronism, Lukacs adds that “ ‘necessary anachronism’ can emerge organically from historical material, if the past portrayed is clearly recognized and experienced by contemporary writers as the necessary prehistory of the present” (67). Evaluating the long history of theorists and authors considering how to ground anachronism with the historical, Luzzi ultimately argues “on behalf of the capacity of aesthetic representations associated with anachronism to employ a well-articulated

cultural sign system - forms, allusions, and other modes of figurative discourse taken from the history of literature - to reconstitute an alternate or competing model of the historical event or context” (83). Anachronism can be understood as a cultural and aesthetic alternative of representing a historical context. Anachronism therefore goes against time, while still in relation to the literal history of a particular work (“Anachronism”).

I aim to ground my analysis of particular 1920s works in both a historical framework and a theoretical framework, discussed later, developed by Mikhail Bakhtin and that of the chronotope, a method to understand the time and space in relationship to a novel (“Anachronism”). The following is a brief introduction on the two texts mainly discussed, Jean Toomer’s *Cane* and Willa Cather’s *The Professor’s House*. This paper will expand on this notion of anachronism, focusing on how authors from the 1920s made use of a structure “out of time,” or anachronistic structure, in order to portray their historical moment, whether via experiments with point of view or with narrative chronology.

Jean Toomer’s *Cane*, published in 1923, is an example of a text that experiments with time jumps and multiple points of view. After the abolition of slavery and decades of segregation, the Harlem Renaissance saw writers like Toomer artistically express and inspire other art forms during the modernist era of the early 20th century. Toomer wrote a collection of vignettes in the form of poems, short stories, and songs, with no particular chronological order or identifiable time or space in which these characters interact with one another, ultimately allowing patterns and themes concerning the relationship between the American South and North to stand out. There is a mix of prose and verse in each varying chapter or section, with narration from a

variety of characters at different periods of time in the North and in the South of the United States.

The Professor's House by Willa Cather, published in 1925, experiments with time in a different way. The narrative is divided into three books: "The Family," "Tom Outland's Story," and "The Professor." The prose is consistent throughout the novel, yet the three sections that make up the novel do not happen in chronological order. Set in a period of rapid modernization, the story follows Professor St. Peter and his family as they move out of their beloved, lived-in home in Michigan. The story opens with "The Family," who have just moved to a new home, with the professor struggling to let go of the old home and its memories. This is followed by "Tom Outland's Story," where Tom, one of St. Peter's students, shares his story in the indigenous lands of the West prior to moving to Michigan to study. The story concludes with the St. Peter family, later in time than the first section, the family packed up and moved, and St. Peter refusing to leave the old home.

Cane and *The Professor's House* both have a nonlinear structure, but use different means: points of view, chapter length, and style. In this sense, anachronism seems to function in these texts on a formal level of the structure and on a more stylistic level of the broader historical context of the narrative itself.

Structural Anachronism

When the term "structural anachronism" is used in this thesis, I refer to a variety of techniques for creating non-linear narrative, techniques to which authors turn because the structure of the Bildungsroman felt too constraining. The primary works examined are not meant serve as a summation of nonchronological narratives, let alone as a comparison to one another,

rather these texts show how various authors represent the concept of being *out of time* (anachronism) through the literary structure of a narrative (“Anachronism”). As an object may be considered “out of time,” I aim to provide these works as examples of structural anachronism for two reasons:

- To show how an author may rearrange storylines, multiple points of view, and settings, ultimately manipulating the formal structure of the narrative itself and leaving it out of time—*structural anachronism*.
- To show how an author’s text challenges the traditional artistic norms of the subsequent decades, an act becoming anachronistic in and of itself for its time period, by experimenting with a text’s structure—*structural anachronism*.

Critics have described nonlinear narration in many different ways: consider David Herman’s conceptualization of polychronic narration, Joseph Luzzi’s “The Rhetoric of Anachronism,” Genette’s work on nonlinearity, Bakhtin’s work on both polyphony and the chronotope, plus the work of Roland Barthes, Georg Lukacs, and many others. This thesis contributes to this critical conversation by trying to understand how art makes meaning out of locating ourselves in relation to abstract concepts of time and space at the turn of the century.

Before applying my articulation of the terms anachronism and structural anachronism to the selected works, I review scholarship on nonlinear narrative and outline the historical context of the 1920s that serves as a foundation for these texts. I will also outline Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept the chronotope, which helps characterize how anachronism functions in the works of both Toomer and Cather.

Nonlinearity in narratives

Previous scholarship on nonlinear forms of expression has primarily discussed time sequence (chronology)'s relationship to narrative. Gerard Genette describes the relationship between the temporal order of a narrative and that of the story itself as "anachronies," meaning, "the various types of discordance between the two orderings of story and narrative" (35-36). Moreover, Genette approaches these fragments or anachronies as either analepses (a scene flashing back in time) or prolepses (a scene that flashes forward in time), as well as with a particular reach (the temporal distance backwards or forwards, compared to the narrative present that paused to share the anachrony) and extent (the duration of that fragmented story in relation to the larger narratological story) (Genette 48 and 67; Chatman 354). Other scholars, such as Seymour Chatman, have analyzed Genette's formula of a narrative and its temporal relationship into three categories, order, duration, and frequency; Chatman specifies that Genette's work paved the way for our understanding of "the various temporal relations that exist in narratives as functions of the relation between story-time and discourse-time" (368). Likewise, David Herman expands on the conversation of nonlinearity, pointing out that "in functional terms, proleptic storytelling, by eliminating or reducing narrative suspense, requires an interpretive reorientation on the part of the story-recepient" (74). Non-chronological narrative compels readers to reorient themselves and contribute to the text's meaning. Roland Barthes also analyzes stories with functions, actions, and narrative systems (narration) in his essay "An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative"—in ways Genette too ventures to categorize and understand the fundamental building blocks of narratives (Barthes).

Like Barthes, Genette, and other scholars and theorists, there are formulas and definitions for various methods of categorizing literature, language, narratives, and general storytelling. This

thesis aims to think about anachronism as a whole, beyond momentary analyses or prolyses (as Genette describes). Looking at American fiction from the 1920s that adopts various methods of nonlinearity will help define structural anachronism. The decade's artistic and literary work is then in and of itself grappling with understanding anachronistic ideas *also* anachronistic for its time of American society in the 1920s.

The Era of Many Titles

The structural anachronism present in fiction from the 1920s in some ways reflects the disruptive nature of the period itself, which witnessed socioeconomic, political, and civil advancements and obstacles that contributed to a sense of disorientation and flux in American identity. The widespread disaffection in the wake of the First World War gave rise to the name, "The Lost Generation." *Only Yesterday* by Frederick Lewis Allen, a "retrospective journalist" (Kennedy 310), outlines the history of America in the 1920s and noted that "even as this glorious peace began to seem a reality and not a dream, the nation went on thinking with the mind of people at war" (Allen 28). With a sense of instability and disenchantment at a national and societal level, norms were unstable: "the compulsion for unity was gone, and division was taking its place. The compulsion for idealism was gone, and realism was in the ascendant" (Allen 34). To summarize a momentous decade in several sentences, Allen writes,

The principal remaining forces which accelerated the revolution in manners and morals were all 100 percent American. They were prohibition, the automobile¹, the confession and sex magazines, and the movies. When the Eighteenth Amendment was ratified, prohibition seemed...to have an almost united country behind it. Evasion of the law began immediately, however, and strenuous and sincere opposition to it. (108)

With each change intertwined with another², rebellion, reform, and improvisation infiltrated the decade, including the arts (Allen 112).

The “Roaring Twenties,” a term coined by F. Scott Fitzgerald, in his collection *Tales of the Jazz Age*, saw a flowering of artistic movements, including the Harlem Renaissance, and the Jazz Age (Thomas). Frederick Lewis Allen describes how “the country felt that it ought to be enjoying itself more than it was, and that life was futile and nothing mattered much” (86).

Though the decade brought disillusionment, a likely reestablishment of values and instability, there still was “new promise for the intellectual life of the country. With the collapse of fixed values went a collapse of the old water-tight critical standards in the arts, opening the way for fresh and independent work to win recognition” (Allen 251).

Bakhtin’s Chronotope

In the literary sphere, “fresh and independent work” meant reevaluating the traditional form of the Bildungsroman (Allen 251). For Bakhtin, the critic Eduard Vlasov observes, the Bildungsroman was “a logical and natural completion in the development of the genre of the novel,” and the center of a Bildungsroman world is “its ability to emerge and to develop along with the characters” (49 and 50, respectively). Mikhail Bakhtin further describes his concept of the novel and the importance of discourse in the novel in his work *The Dialogic Imagination*, written in the 1930s and 1940s.

The primacy that Bakhtin attributes to the Bildungsroman is reflected in his influential theorization of the “chronotope” in *The Dialogic Imagination*. Chronotope is a term that Bakhtin uses to refer to specific narrative representation of time and space that take on a distinctive form in literary texts. Bakhtin says that the term chronotope, meaning, “literally, ‘time space’ ” refers

“to the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature” (“Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel”). Some examples of chronotopes are “the road” or “the castle,” to name a few, based on the hero’s movements and environment. Though Bakhtin considers the chronotope’s applicability to novels of various kinds, he focuses on works with a singular protagonist, reflecting his privileging of the Bildungsroman. Bakhtin points to its metaphorical relation to Albert Einstein’s Theory of Relativity and mathematics more broadly; however, he continues that he describes the chronotope as dealing with time, “the fourth dimension of space,” as a vital element in literature (“Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel”). The road, for example, becomes a vessel for portraying how a protagonist develops over time: time “becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history” (“Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel”). A novel’s chronotope, such as the road, becomes its own category of artistic experimentation with the plot and setting of a story. Bakhtin emphasizes how chronotopes have a unifying quality in his concluding remarks of the essay, suggesting that, in trying to understand the reality of a novel, the spatial and temporal elements of a novel must be understood in relation to one another (“X. Concluding Remarks,” “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel”). Therefore, in order to understand the reality of a novel, the spatial and temporal elements of a novel must be understood together.

Bakhtin specifically connects the chronotope of *the adventure novel of everyday life* (“II. Apuleius and Petronius”) and that of *the road* (“I. The Greek Romance”) to the metaphor of the “path of life” (“Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel”). However, he also acknowledges that, when considering a novel’s temporospatial structure, we must think beyond linear plot structure (“II. Apuleius and Petronius,” “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the

Novel”). Scholars such as Vlasov have described the chronotope of the road as one method to explore “spatial forms” in art; Vlasov emphasizes how the road “symbolizes a way of life and justifies the motives connected with unexpected meetings” (55). Bakhtin shows how time (ie. the passing of time in a character’s life) “fuses together with space and flows in it (forming the road),” becoming an broader metaphor of “the road as a course,” as exemplified in such idiomatic phrases as, “ ‘the course of a life,’ ‘to set out on a new course,’ [and] ‘the course of history’ ” (“X. Concluding Remarks,” “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel”).

However, in looking at the selected works of the 1920s, I aim to expand on this conceptualization of the road, arguing that roads also operate in a less singular fashion in order to dramatize different points of view across different character’s timelines in ways that reflect the expansive changes taking place in the twentieth century (“Discourse in Poetry and Discourse in the Novel,” “Discourse in the Novel” *The Dialogic Imagination*). For example, works by Faulkner, or Sherwood Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio*, feature ambiguously-described timelines that the reader must navigate via a protagonist’s adventure along the road, along with other characters and other roads.

Bakhtin describes narrative in itself in terms that evoke a road, as we can think of both the events depicted in a narrative, as well as the act of narrating them as events that lie “before us,” like looking ahead along a road:

Before us are two events—the event that is narrated in the work and the event of narration itself (we ourselves participate in the later, as listeners or readers); these events take place in different times...and in different places, but at the same time these two events are indissolubly united in a single but complex event that we might call the work in the totality of all its events...thus we perceive the fullness of the work in all its wholeness

and indivisibility, but at the same time, we understand the diversity of the elements that constitute it. (“X. Concluding Remarks,” “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel”)

Here, Bakhtin argues that understanding a text in its “wholeness and indivisibility” requires attending to the narrative events of a plot, as well as the event of its narration (Bakhtin’s *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*).

One of the other influential concepts associated with Bakhtin is the polyphony or multi-voicedness that he associates with the novel form. To think about the chronotopic qualities of the texts considered here in terms of *roads* rather than *the road*, is to understand polyphony as a quality that can characterize plot structure as well as dialogue. In characterizing the polyphonic qualities of Fyodor Dostoevsky’s fiction, Bakhtin observes “a fundamentally new novelistic genre” in his chapter “Dostoevsky’s Polyphonic Novel”: “What unfolds in his [Dostoevsky’s] works...[is a] plurality of consciousnesses, with equal rights and each with its own world” (pg 6, italics his). In the works I consider here, this multiplicity of worlds and consciousnesses finds expression not only in different voices but also in different narrative form, via distinct sections and timelines, all of which contributes to the particular kind of psychological realism that Bakhtin associated with Dostoevsky. Having not just a variety of voices but chapters, sections, characters, and timelines, the multitude of consciousnesses is effectively and realistically portrayed through a nonlinear, nonchronological narrative. Understanding this framework in the background of my emphasis on Bakhtin’s theory of time and space in a novel, opens up a larger conversation of narrative discussion and simultaneity when applied to the structure of the novel. In the section that follows, I show how this dynamic operates in Toomer’s *Cane*.

Cane

Jean Toomer's *Cane* (1923) experiments with nonlinear narrative told from multiple points of view, straying away from the traditional coming-of-age narrative for a singular protagonist to a narrative without a clear developmental plot and multiple characters' perspectives. With a blend of points of view and no singular protagonist, Toomer can present social and systemic issues from a collective rather than individual experience. Toomer relies on prose narrative to tell the story, but the constant shift between realistic prose short stories and vivid poems in the voices of various characters destabilizes the reader's sense of narrative sequence. Different "chapters" seem to be happening without any consideration of chronology for the reader, indicating the structure seeming to go against the normal perceived time (chronology) into something anachronistic. By doing so, Toomer explains the collective experience of his characters at a deeper level, in ways a traditional Bildungsroman narrative, for instance, could not collectively comment on. Toomer uses ambiguity as to point of view and plot, disorienting the spatial-temporal relationship with the structure of the storyline, in order to discuss the African American experience in the early 20th century in ways an individual perspective could not have accomplished.

Toomer narrates the story through the nonlinear structure of various characters' vignettes, portrayed both individually and collectively, disorienting the reader and further paralleling that experience to that of the character(s). In "Esther," a third-person short story, Esther is described as a "dictie [snobbish]" Black woman who grew up entranced by King Barlo, a Black man who has spiritual awakenings while in town (Toomer 31 and 155 [footnotes]). As she grew up, Esther wanted to approach King Barlo when he was in town, but when Esther did, Barlo asked, " 'what brought you here, lil milk-white gal?' " (Toomer 32). His response and smile to her presence, after all these years wanting to know this figure, felt "ugly and repulsive," causing her to feel sin

creep its way in (Toomer 32-33). At the height of this moment, Esther runs out and sees the town has vanished (Toomer 33). Toomer's story ends abruptly, and, just as with Esther herself, the reader too is lost trying to make sense of the racial and class discrepancies that Esther is faced with, as a somewhat upper-class Black woman who is described as having a lighter complexion.

The following chapter, "Conversion," is written in verse. From the momentous ending of "Esther," in which the young woman flees from a seemingly corrupt scene of morality into the abyss, we quickly jump back to the time of the Transatlantic Slave Trade in an entirely different narrative form of verse. The reader quickly adjusts to the new form and the new time period, while still keeping in mind why Esther felt repulsed by this interaction with King Barlo as sinful. This idea of conversion and change adds further moral and systemic notions to "Conversion." The 11-line poem describes, "African Guardian of Souls,.../Yielding to new words" (Toomer lines 1 and 5). "Conversion" reminds the reader of the conversion of African slaves to a white Christian religion, following a "white-faced sardonic/god" (Toomer lines 7-8). This history is remembered as it has carried and shifted when Toomer considers the identity of the African American people of the early 20th century. The cynical face of the white God in "Conversion," as well as the drunkenness of the "African Guardian of Souls," mirrors the previous story using altogether different characters in a different space and time (Toomer). Esther's fear of "conception with a drunken man" reflects her experience as a light-skinned Black woman (Toomer 33). Esther's evident struggle with identity and class is emphasized and reframed by the poem's portrayal of the struggle for existential identity that resulted from enslaved African peoples' forced transportation to the Americas. The theme of religion and its relationship to race are further emphasized when considering the latter story brings out the religious elements in the former, as "Esther" is a story in Christianity of a woman going against her "king" (Toomer).

Following “Conversion,” and in keeping with the focus on religion, we encounter the poem, “Portrait in Georgia.” The imagery evoked in this poem is of violent devastation. A woman is described with hair like a “lyncher’s rope” and with descriptions of old scars and ash (Toomer 33). After creating a literal scene with Esther, written in prose, someone described as an outsider in her town as a wealthy Black woman with lighter skin, Toomer then turns to describing a figurative poem, written in verse, on conversion from African religion(s) to a Western, Christian one. Toomer *then* describes a poem providing a portrait of a woman with words related to the violent crimes that occurred in the South and in Georgia (Toomer). Toomer places these radical shifts from chapter to chapter in no chronological order. The reader is forced to reevaluate these historical experiences as a collective. Toomer is able to give voice to African American identity and speak on layered issues that surround race, class, and social status from the time of the Transatlantic Slave Trade to Segregation without adhering to chronological order. The structure acts anachronistically. Scholars such as Bowie Duncan notes how, “in *Cane*, there is a definite break with traditional linear thought about composition which perceived of literature as on a time sequence composed of the past, present and future” (324). Chronology is then much more abstracted and universally *relative*, leaving room for space’s simultaneity that ultimately allows the narrative to become a more emotional and thematic observation of the change and continuous adversities African and African American people have had to experience regarding race, rather than linear (Duncan 324).

Bakhtin uses relativity in his explanation of the chronotope, inspired by Albert Einstein’s works on the Theory of Relativity in quantum physics and mathematics; this narrative strategy of reevaluating relativity in terms of a novel’s chronology allows the readers to think of events occurring simultaneously rather than simply cause and effect, ultimately considering time as the

“fourth dimension of space” in literature (“Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel”). There is a distinct relationship between time and space in the literary form of the anachronistic structure as well. Duncan describes how the previous understanding of a three dimensional reality with a singular point of perception perceiving isolated moments (ie. event A comes before event B) is now a

new reality, being fluid and impermanent, [that] is dependent for perception on the relative position of both the observer and the object observed. A sense of simultaneity is also an aspect of this reality for the delineation of reality that is so amorphous demands it be refracted into planes perceived synchronically. (324)

In this sense, the reader’s perspective is then presented on a macro level, which widens the scope of reality as it happens not sequentially one after another but within the same field of space as other characters’ perspectives, providing a more fundamental, true perspective. The spatial planes in which all of these stories take place present a systemic pattern that otherwise may be categorized in a linear order if presented one after another in a cause-effect type manner. The physical structure from chapter to chapter points to my application of structural anachronism as a literal formal method of presenting a narrative.

However, Toomer’s character of Dan Moore, in the story, “Box Seat,” provides a helpful example of the more stylistic, thematic interpretation of structural anachronism as well. Moore proclaims that “life bends joy and pain, beauty and ugliness, in such a way that no one may isolate them. No one should want to. Perfect joy, or perfect pain, with no contrasting element to define them, would mean a monotony of consciousness” (Toomer 67). Toomer’s use of the phrase “monotony of consciousness” reveals why he might structure *Cane* as a collection of vignettes that do not have a defined chronological order (Toomer 67). This shuffling of human

experiences avoids the monotony of the consciousness of the nineteenth-century linear narrative. Instead, Toomer creates a series of conscious experience, allowing him to provide a fuller portrayal of the decade in a way that is not confined by one individual perspective. The mix of stories describes the North and South, as well as different emotions and tones, to allow for a more collective and deeper, multi-faceted portrait of the period. For Duncan, Toomer's presentation of consciousness out of order "threaten[s] the linear concept of reality," and more so, the "multifaceted reality in process which would be destroyed if categorized and segmented" (332). In order to avoid making such distortions, the narrative must reflect reality's multifaceted nature, therefore, undergoing radical shifts when contrasted from prose to verse amidst the historical imagery. The novel's themes surrounding race and identity during a time of segregation in the 1920s of America from both the South and North could not have been realized in the same way had the story been structured chronologically, thus presenting structural anachronism in the stylistic, historically contextual way too.

The rhythm of *Cane* blends the two understandings or layers of structural anachronism (formal and artistic) in what Duncan calls "*Cane's* ancient rhythm [into something] very modern" (332). This idea is something Frederik L. Rusch expands on in "Form, Function, and Creative Tension in *Cane*: Jean Toomer and the Need for the Avant-Garde." Rusch writes, "The paradox of the avant-garde's use of the old to bring forth the new is typical of the modernist artists of Toomer's time" (20). In the 1920s, which saw economic, sociopolitical, and industrial changes, the need to utilize old ideas as well as seemingly futuristic or avant-garde ideas produced anachronistic effects. Whether through artistic movements of the time, such as Cubism or jazz, there was a disruption to the linear structure of the decade, feeling *against time* – "ana" "chronos" (Rusch 21). Likewise, Rusch points to the cubist and jazz elements in his analysis of

Cane, adding, “this time element is missing in Toomer’s writing as well as in jazz improvisation. *Cane* could go on forever, just as a jazz piece could” (24). Jazz does not have any particular order, but rather, moves, repeats, refers back to, and changes sporadically; however, it is in this structural mix of sounds that a piece is articulated and appreciated. The combination of new and old influences, including blues and religious rhythms, both from Africa and Europe, as well as America, creates something new (Rusch 23). The avant-garde movement was described as unusual for the decade in America. This “Lost Generation” used pieces and influences that took inspiration from another time to understand the space in which they were historically and socially in the 1920s, which is reflected by the structurally anachronistic pieces that were a product of the decade, such as Toomer’s *Cane*.

Toomer, a prominent author of the Harlem Renaissance, devotes several of the middle stories of *Cane* to jazz and its art form, including “Seventh Street,” “Theater,” “Box Seat,” and “Bona and Paul,” further allowing us to contextualize the historical significance of the 1920s. In “Theater,” Toomer writes, “a pianist slips into the pit and improvises jazz. The walls awake. Arms of the girls, and their limbs, which... jazz, jazz...” (55). The dialogue and narrative description in “Theater” are continuously interrupted by musical phrases and encouragements, such as “(Oh dance!),” and, “(Lift your skirts, Baby, and talk t papa!),” encouraging the reader to accept this improvisational flow of the disjointed, unscripted, *natural* depiction of the theater scene (Toomer 55). Not only does the structure reflect the sentiment of anachronism as out of the given time, but the very subject of the vignette themselves show, via this musical example, how space and time does not have to be in a defined order.

Cane’s structure can be understood in part by Toomer’s own views about his identity as a biracial man during the time of the Harlem Renaissance. His friend and literary peer, Waldo

Frank, wrote a foreword for the first edition of *Cane*, describing Toomer's work as the South:

"This book is the South. I do not mean that *Cane* covers the South or is the South's full voice...A poet has arisen in that land who writes, not as a Southerner, not as a rebel against Southerners, not as a Negro, not as apologist or priest or critic: who writes as a poet" (Frank, *Cane* 154-155).

Frank identifies Toomer as a poet, while still also acknowledging,

the gifted Negro has been too often thwarted from becoming a poet because his world was forever forcing him to recollect that he was a Negro. The artist must lose such lesser identities in the great well of life...The whole will and mind of the creator must go below the surfaces of race. And this has been an almost impossible condition for the American Negro to achieve, forced every moment of his life into a specific and superficial plane of consciousness. (Frank, *Cane* 155)

Frank identifies the artistry behind his works; moreover, scholars like Mark Helbling in "Jean Toomer and Waldo Frank: A Creative Friendship" describe the correspondences between Toomer and Frank to reveal Toomer's own considerations about his identity:

Toomer explained to Frank something of his family history and his attitude towards his diverse geneology: [qtd. from a letter between the two peers] 'My own life has been equally divided between the two racial groups...Of the Negro, what facts are known have too often been perverted...It has been necessary, therefore, that I spend a disproportionate time in Negro study.' (173)

Toomer's own views about his identity help to understand *Cane*'s structure. The chapters structured as vignettes exemplify the fractured nature of portraying consciousness and act as experiments with narrative structure: "Although race was no more divisive than other aspects of the prevailing social order, it tended to fragment man and to block a fuller realization of his

deepest self” (Helbling 174). Therefore, Toomer presented himself with his “emphasis on inner states of human consciousness together with his sense of a transcendent completeness” (Helbling 174). In considering this wholeness or completeness, Toomer writes of American identity with a collective that is simultaneous; Waldo writes,

These materials . . . the ancient black man, mute, inaccessible, and yet so mystically close to the new tumultuous members of his race, the simple slave Past, the shredding Negro Present, the iridescent passionate dream of the Tomorrow . . . are made and measured by a craftsman into an unforgettable music. (155)

Toomer experiments with a collective approach, contrasting prose and verse and using a variety of characters; form does not grant allowances to one part over another but uplifts a community sense that can be relatable and felt by many, as Waldo pinpoints, felt by the rhythms of the “unforgettable music.”

Cane contains many of the definitive elements of nonlinear narratives: it lacks a singular storyline and does not unfold in chronological order. It additionally represents a multitude of consciousnesses, characters, and timelines in many imaginative spaces that these individual chapters are taking place, like a whole arrangement of roads. Like Bakhtin’s “plurality of consciousnesses,” it seems that Toomer’s use of varying chapter vignettes points to the form of the narrative (its structure) as anachronistic (“Dostoevsky’s Polyphonic Novel” 6). However, because of the broader themes and affect across the chapters of feeling out of time or with music, as well as understanding Toomer’s own identity, *Cane* also presents the artistic or stylistic ways of applying the term structural anachronism. With this in mind, now I turn to Willa Cather’s

work that experiments with nonlinear structure differently, helping to further define what I mean by structural anachronism.

The Professor's House

Willa Cather's *The Professor's House* (1925) is divided into three sections: "The Family," "Tom Outland's Story," and "The Professor." Following the Professor St. Peter and his family as they move out in the first and third books, the second book juxtaposes the very traditional sense of aesthetics and familial culture in the second book, where readers are confronted with Tom's story and a very different appreciation for what culture is. Through this jumping back and forth, readers are forced to piece together the value of culture. This illustrates structural anachronism in the formal sense with section one describing the time after knowing Tom and moving out, section two focusing on Tom's story entirely removed from the St. Peter family plot, and section three jumping ahead nearing the professor's passing, still unable to cope with what he experienced in his life.

When looking at the three books structurally, it seems to take a BAC form rather than an ABC form. "The Family," Book I, opens when "the moving was over and done. Professor St. Peter was alone in the dismantled house where he had lived ever since his marriage, where he had worked out his career and brought up his two daughters" (Cather Book I, Ch 1). Cather immediately immerses her readers in the aftermath of the family's move to a larger home. From the very beginning, Cather positions readers in a very active position—the readers must work to piece together the story. Further along, Cather introduces the readers to Tom, one of St. Peter's students who came from the Southwest with no high school education. The connection between

the professor and his former student Tom seems relevant because of how St. Peter is continuously reminded of Tom Outland in this house (Cather).

After jumping between memories of Tom Outland and conversations with his family, St. Peter had a plan “to give part of this summer to Tom Outland’s diary—to edit and annotate it for publication” and write an introduction (Cather Book I, Ch 17). This already sets up a very nonchronological order of the narrative, developing the course (chronotope) of St. Peter’s life (recall Bakhtin’s observation that the metaphor of the “course” of life is an example of the chronotope of the road) and then abruptly turning to Tom’s own life. St. Peter seems to be approaching a flashback where “Tom at last told the story he had always kept back...a story of youthful defeat,” when Book I ends (Cather Book I, Ch 17). In anticipation of a story, the readers turn the page to find an entirely new book written from the point of view of Tom himself, with no association with the St. Peter family or any aspect of the plot seen in Book I. Already, readers must work towards placing this story in a different narrative time, as well as geographic space. Tom, presumably, begins, “the thing that side-tracked me and made me so late coming to college was a somewhat unusual accident, or string of accidents. It began with a poker game, when I was a call boy in Pardee, New Mexico” (Cather Book II, Ch 1). Momentarily reviewing the first section, readers begin in “The Family” with St. Peter, who has already moved out but still remains in the home to write. Thereafter, Cather forces readers to distinguish moments of reflection on the past and conversations in the present, blurring the lines of chronology into an even, simultaneous, “polyspatial” field. The moment readers seem to be able to identify some sort of position in the past with Tom and the professor’s conversation about Tom’s story, “Tom Outland’s Story” reorients the reader’s point of view and time frame. However, once Book II begins, Tom himself goes back into his own memory, recalling that even before college, “it

began with a poker game” (Cather Book II, Ch 1). What felt like simultaneous memories of St. Peter’s in Book I now feels like a suspension in time entirely in Book II: “We went out about the first of May, and joined our cattle twenty miles south of Pardee, down toward the Blue Mesa. The Blue Mesa was one of the landmarks we always saw from Pardee” (Cather Book II, Ch 1). Because Tom is sharing a story from his past, and Book I’s conclusion seems to reflect the professor’s strong desire to ponder the past; time feels still when reading about how Tom and his partner went towards the Blue Mesa. Anna Wilson observes, “[t]he Professor’s attempt to stop time, to stay where he is physically, to remain enveloped in a past... In the absence of the Professor’s own forward motion toward meaning, the reader is impelled to search elsewhere, geographically, chronologically, and formally” (Wilson 65). Cather provides the geographic locations as they jump from scene to scene, state to state; however, the reader must discern the relationship between chronology and form here. Since the three books are not organized chronologically, the sequence of events and the structure become intertwined and reliant on one another. The work is placed on the reader to figure out how to understand the relationship between narrative form (the structure itself) and chronological sequence to understand its meaning together.

What Cather presents is a novel where multiple versions of a character must exist at once because of the layering of time frames. Both for St. Peter and Tom’s portion, they exist consciously in the present and reflect on the past, making the conscious memories abstract in relation to time and when these instances are taking place. In Tom’s case, he frames the narrative of the Blue Mesa story towards the end by saying, “In the spring, just a year after I quarrelled with Roddy, I landed here and walked into your garden, and the rest you know” (Cather Book II, Ch 7). In a chronological sense, a passive reader might expect to begin Book III with a

continuation of Tom and St. Peter's discussion looking back on his time, as that is how Book I led to Book II. However, the reader must reorient themselves to where in the larger context of the novel Book III opens: "All the most important things in his life, St. Peter sometimes reflected, had been determined by chance...St. Peter thought he had fared well with fate" (Cather Book III, Ch 1). The reader is unaware of any sort of timeline this could be, when St. Peter reflects on chance and fate, like the meeting of Tom Outland. Initially, one might think that this is before St. Peter moved in Book I or really any time in St. Peter's life. However, arguably, it presents a St. Peter who is moving out and entering the later stages of life, reflecting on his career, his family, and, of course, Tom³:

He wouldn't choose to live his life over—he might not have such good luck again. He had had two romances: one of the heart, which had filled his life for many years, and a second of the mind—of the imagination. Just when the morning brightness of the world was wearing off for him, along came Outland and brought him a kind of second youth.

(Cather Book III, Ch 1)

"A second youth" seems anachronistic in itself, as youth is constrained by the beginning of one's life and the professor is speaking at the end of his life. Moreover, "The Professor knew, of course, that adolescence grafted a new creature into the original one, and that the complexion of a man's life was largely determined by how well or ill his original self and his nature as modified by sex rubbed on together" (Cather Book III, Ch 2). Again, Book III presents ideas through the reflection of the narrator's life with phrases like "adolescence grafted a new creature into the original one" with "the complexion of a man's life" (Cather Book III, Ch 2). This reflection of the narrator's life is parallel to the reflection of the narrative form itself. The overall narrative being nonlinear is an example of structural anachronism in the formal sense, as readers encounter

the chronotope of the road (or, rather, system of roads) between Tom and the professor, as well as the family, across different times and in different spaces.

The Cliff City

The second book of *The Professor's House*, however, reveals the stylistic element of structural anachronism. Cather introduces the ruins of a former Indigenous community up on the cliffs of the Blue Mesa that Tom encounters in his youth in "Tom Outland's Story." Tom describes stumbling upon the ruins on the mountainside as "more like sculpture than anything else. I knew at once that I had come upon the city of some extinct civilization" (Cather Book II, Ch 3). His initial encounter displaces the city from any sort of reality, "like sculpture"⁴ over a real city (Cather Book II, Ch 3). Though it was long extinct, it still was there in the present, as if out of the wrong time (anachronistic in character). Tom's encounter with the ruins leads him to undertake further research with experts in the area. He discovers that the now-uninhabited "Cliff City" was considered "too far advanced for their time and environment"; the Cliff City is a glimpse to a past time in the novel's world where even at their height of existence, they were too technologically advanced (Cather Book II, Ch 5)⁵. As the city is now in ruins, Tom struggles to make sense of the Cliff City people's history and technology as it is out of the timeline of the narrative.

Cather further describes the Cliff City people as "cut off here without the influence of example or emulation, with no incentive but some natural yearning for order and security" (Book II, Ch 5). Without traditional expectations of how the Cliff City people were to live, the Cliff City people had a "natural yearning for order and security"; however, they were still far too

“ahead of their time,” as well as environment (or space) to succeed up to the present day (Cather Book II, Ch 5).

The conclusion that the city is too advanced points to an external, larger theme of anachronism across the entire novel, something out of the time and place, through an internal, physical example that helps readers understand how this reflects in the literal structure of the book as a whole. Just as with the people, the readers have a “natural yearning for order” when it comes to reading a novel front to back (Cather Book II, Ch 5). Cather disrupts the expectation for chronological order and encourages the reader to not only piece together the story's order but also to figure out *why* Cather intentionally places “Tom Outland’s Story” in the middle of the other two books. When Cather says the people are “too advanced for their time,” time acts thematically as a larger parallel of the narrative’s abstraction of chronology; continuing the metaphor, when Cather describes how the people and city are “too advanced for their environment,” the physical space thematically reflects the narrative’s overall structure (Cather Book II, Ch 5).

Parallel to the actual example of the city itself, *The Professor’s House* reflects a similar theme of being too far advanced in time, in both the chronological order (or lack thereof) and the environment (the imagined space that these stories can be pictured in relation to one another): the novel as an artistic work presents this too-advanced theme when Cather moves her writing style away from the traditional Bildungsroman or historical novel that portrays time chronologically. To provide overall themes of reestablishing what cultivation and culture mean, Cather uses a nonlinear, anachronistic structure. Wilson observes,

The success or otherwise of the tripartite structure of *The Professor’s House* has been debated since the novel's publication; but whether read as a fatal incoherence or defended

as, for example, modernist innovation, it seems clear that the novel must be accorded significance of some sort. (73)

Wilson acknowledges Cather's innovation of the novel by looking at the structure with its advanced, nonchronological technique.

Wilson presents this idea of the Cliff City as an unusually advanced society of its time which further illustrates Cather's parallels between narrative and form. Wilson adds, "the life lived within the Cliff City is imagined as fulfilled, integrated, and civilized. The mesa, then, operates as a historical ideal as well as an aesthetic one, providing a past that can be juxtaposed to a degraded present as a model for social reorganization" (64). The example of the Cliff City shows this parallel of the narrative itself (using the example of a community at odds with its own time in history) with narrative formal structure (the novel's own use of anachronism). The mesa and the Cliff City are set to have thrived in the past and yet are presented in the present tense as a failed society (Wilson 64-65). Wilson calls this a "model for social reorganization," which seems to point to the novel's form as a whole: a model for a narrative form that is reorganized by providing Tom's past (Book II) juxtaposed in the middle of the professor's present (Book I and III) (64). Considering that the tribe was "too advanced" for its time, to a fault, the ruins of the Cliff City and the people disappearing may suggest Cather's notion of historical advancement (Cather). Whether Cather is directly stating that the Cliff City failed because it was in the wrong chronological time or not, Cather is exploring themes of expression and progress away from the traditional methodology of forms of the novel prior to the 1920s. The fact that the Cliff City failed because of its advancements may show that it is the environment or space that fails to support a progressivist community approaching living in a nontraditional way. Wilson further notes, "Tom Outland's story is an enclosed narrative, framed by the Professor's search, or

perhaps rather his refusal to search, even internally: such a structure of itself intimates that the answer, certainly as to the nature of the Professor's problem, and perhaps its solution, lies within, at the novel's protected core" (66). By interrupting the professor's narration with Tom's story about discovering the Cliff City, the nonlinear structure act as an answer to the reader about what the professor views as correct and meaningful, by having the professor reflecting on his existence in space and time through the second book (as the narrator and creator of this story). As the professor finds meaning by going back in time to the events of Book II, the reader too can see how Cather makes the structure a device of storytelling that also can indicate themes of identity and culture beyond the words itself. However, this may also indicate Willa Cather's *own* answer in the context of her identity and the history of the moment.

Cather: *On Writing*

In *On Writing*, a collection of essays and correspondence, Cather describes her intentions in structuring *The Professor's House*, particularly her experimentation with novelistic form. In her chapter "On *The Professor's House*," Cather describes how she "wished to try two experiments in form...inserting the Nouvelle into the Roman" (Cather, "On the Professor's House" *On Writing*). In this letter, Miss Cather expresses her desire to mix different forms of writing in one book. Incorporating a Nouvelle, or smaller novel, into a developed, larger one requires a certain level of commitment on the part of both the reader and writer. In the case of *The Professor's House*, Cather provides a story within another story, creating a structure in which readers have to figure out for themselves how the different parts relate to each other.

Interestingly, Cather compares her narrative experimentation with structure in *The Professor's House* to musical form, remarking, "the experiment...which interested me was something a little more vague...akin to the arrangement followed in sonatas in which the academic sonata form was handled somewhat freely" (Cather, "On the Professor's House" *On Writing*). When considering Cather's work with this musical analogy in mind, it is clear that the auditory and visual forms of art inspired her. Cather directly ascribes her created structure in *The Professor's House* to "the academic sonata form" and its arrangement, "handled somewhat freely" (Cather, "On the Professor's House" *On Writing*). In his article, " 'Listening with Supersensual Ear': Music in the Novels of Willa Cather," John Ditsky connects Cather's use of music and its nature to a habit present in her novels: "The habit of making one's personal decisions on the basis of the emblem of another's life" (160). This is evident in *The Professor's House* as Cather describes the professor as someone who wants to stay in his home and not a new one, as well as someone who qualifies the cultural value of his possessions based on another aspect of someone else's life: Tom Outland. Ditsky continues that the three-part structural technique is considered the *sonata-allegro* structure: "A-B A, with the editorial frame occupying the outer perimeter of the narrative and often not immediately demanding the requisite read" (160). The first and third books of *The Professor's House* can, therefore, be quantified as the two "A" parts of the structure and Tom Outland's story that makes up the entirety of the second book is the part "B" in the sonata-allegro.

Cather identifies the sonata-allegro with a sense of freedom, and although the ABA structure seems highly particular in its form, like an equation, the disorienting nature of jumping to an entirely different narrative at the height of understanding the protagonist in Book I with the professor indicates a form of artistic celebration or liberation: Cather experiments with

nonlinearity structures by having the professor reflect and base off of “another emblem of someone else’s [Tom’s] life,” as Ditsky says (160). This experimentation becomes liberating too, appreciating and trying to incorporate musicality and artistic inspiration into a new understanding of the novel as a genre. Ditsky continues in his analysis of Cather’s upbringing and connection to music: “Music was for her a means of unlocking, liberating, narrative treasure-trove” (161).

This liberating act of creating a nonchronological structure (ie. a BAC or ABA rather than ABC sequence) is entirely deliberate; “no better example of this queer structural principle exists than *The Professor’s House*, a book otherwise clearly and oddly broken-backed” (Ditsky, 160). Cather’s narrative experiments align her fiction with the music and abrupt shifts characteristic of the early 20th century. Moreover, Ditsky describes Cather as “one of a small number of twentieth-century American writers nostalgically devoted to Nature during an epoch characterized by increasingly rapid urbanization” (155). Cather depicts her value and connection to nature and music within her novels. Against the rapid changes and just as with the national sentiment of gathering oneself after the horrors of the First World War, Cather creates a nonlinear narrative to reorient the reading into valuing the musical (or rhythmic) effect of the novel. Readers thus can appreciate the sentiment: “Music in its normal form can effect temporary rapprochements,” by how Cather’s structures *The Professor’s House* like a sonata-allegro (Ditsky 160). Despite the historical framework amidst Cather’s writing, Cather still reflects this thematic element of structural anachronism (reorienting oneself in change within the narrative itself) within the narrative’s form (structural anachronistic in a formal sense too).

Though Cather’s work emphasizes valuing the past (as seen in the professor’s general dislike for materiality and appreciation for Tom Outland’s story and his past⁶), Cather still also

introduces the ideas of the aestheticism of art as well as musicality and modernity. She writes, “Just before I began the book I had seen, in Paris, an exhibition of old and modern Dutch paintings,” often with a comforting interior and an expansive environment just outside of the square window in the room (Cather, “On the Professor’s House” *On Writing*). The “remarkable” effect inspired Cather to write *The Professor’s House* in the way she did: Tom Outland’s story is the vast “sea” of history and appreciation and thematic sentiment, enclosed by the interiority of the professor’s mind and home too: Cather explains, “I tried to make Professor St. Peter’s house rather overcrowded and stuffy with new things; American proprieties, clothes, furs, petty ambitions, quivering jealousies — until one got rather stifled. Then I wanted to open the square window and let in the fresh air that blew off the Blue Mesa” (Cather, “On the Professor’s House” *On Writing*).

Having introduced art and nature, Cather connects two seemingly juxtaposing things. How can the professor’s story of moving away from his home precede the story of Tom Outland, searching to understand the past? Metaphorically, Cather opens the window to the past and allows for airflow—for movement. Similarly, the structure’s experimentation allows for movement in the greater understanding of what it means to write a novel in the early 20th century. Ditsky describes Cather’s writing’s ability to depict “the organic development of both character and narrative structure in terms of music— quite often, a music ‘supersensually’ attended to, the song of the Earth itself” (155). Cather experiments and uses the summation of her experiences and connection to music and nature to depict life as accurately as one could, without a typical linear order. The development of Cather’s structure, yes is structural anachronistic in both form and style, but also indicative of the human experience of the time in the 1920s. As the time was highly influenced by artistic movements and constantly changing,

Cather depicts life as it is experienced, which Ditsky compares to music of the song of the Earth (what it is like to live).

By understanding the effect of the nonlinear structure in *The Professor's House*, it is clear where Cather applies the thematic parallels to the structure. Loretta Wasserman further describes this idea in the journal article “The Music of Time: Henri Bergson and Willa Cather.” Wasserman writes, “Structurally, the novel is all about discovering, recreating, preserving the historical or archeological past (St. Peter's history of the Southwest explorers and Tom Outland's city of the cliff-dwellers) juxtaposed to remembering, recalling, allowing to ‘be’ in the present, the personal past (St. Peter and his family)” (232). In other words, structurally, Cather divides the novel into three books, allowing space to discover and preserve a previous story—reflected in the novel’s plot as preserving the literal history in the Blue Mesa, as experiences by Tom Outland. The nonchronological structure concludes with the present, which is in turn paralleled in the narrative itself, as St. Peter allows himself to accept the past developments that have shaped him, which in turn allow himself to move on and move out of the house (from form to the narrative itself). Wasserman expands on this further, adding, “His [St. Peter’s] house is a trap of his own making, his conception of past time as spatialized, solidified, to be grasped through the intellect only” (233). Cather uses the narrative form to reflect the narrative itself. The exploration of the past and the frustration with the present, in anticipation of the future changes is exactly what the professor is grappling with, simultaneously while Cather invites the readers to learn about the present St. Peter’s life and family, explore the past time period in the mesa, and come out of it struggling to understand how all the different timelines fit as the novel closes. As Wasserman put it, “fragments from the remote past become transformed from frozen relics into links with the living” (235). The notion of connecting the past and the present further promotes the idea of

anachronistic structures. Cather experiments with a new literary structure that does not rely on linearity, something outside of the historical context of the 1920s. Cather's characters explore similar ideas of change, unable to anticipate what is to come with one another, anachronistic in character, in a mix of roads intertwining and further expanding, to extend Bakhtin's metaphor.

James Woodress suggests that Cather's own history may illuminate her intentions in writing about a protagonist who disagrees with the future and focuses on the past. Woodress, for whom *The Professor's House* is the "most autobiographical of Cather's novels," argues the value of understanding how Cather felt about her own success, position, and "disenchantment with the world of the 1920s" (201-202). After winning the Pulitzer Prize, Cather wrote *The Professor's House*, at "a disillusioning time era of Prohibition, the scandals of the Harding administration, Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer's witchhunts following World War I, and rampant materialism" (Woodress 202). As Woodress describes this "crisis situation" of Cather's, tradition and materialism becomes something Cather almost seems to reject in her novel. Like how the professor himself rejects materialism in the way the rest of his family are enamored by traditional values, Cather's own experience critiquing industrialization and materialism⁷ of society is reflected by how she experiments with structure (Woodress).

The Professor's House presents another way of articulating the human experience and multiple consciousnesses (as Bakhtin described) through nonlinear narratives. With techniques that replicate musical expression, Cather portrays plurality of voices and opinions that overlap to the point that the time frame in comparison to Book I, II, or III are abstract and the reader must figure out the rationale for organizing the novel nonlinearly. Through the themes of plurality,

reevaluating culture, and change, Cather situates her own experience in the early 20th century to portray the notion of structural anachronism artistically in her literature. Cather therefore simultaneously can portray change and disruption of time through the formal use of the structure in three nonchronological parts of a variety of characters.

Reflections and remarks

Analyzing *Cane* and *The Professor's House*, it is evident that though these may not be typical of the entire decade, they reflect various ways authors at the time were experimenting with novelistic structure. Looking at the structures with three parts, as well as the varying points of view and consciousnesses in each part, indicates a contradictory nature of writing about a collective society with variety of individual experiences. Likewise, the division of the narrative, whether in *Cane's* vignettes or *The Professor's House* musical organization, corresponds to thematic elements within each narrative. For *Cane*, the collective voice of both verse and prose, both abstract and specific narration, indicates a unique time in the history of the 1920s of artistic experimentation. For *The Professor's House*, a character's identity in relation to aesthetic value is seen not only from the different characters point of view in different books, but also the book order itself.

Novels of the 1920s like these exemplify the various ways writers have tried to understand, qualify, and retell what it is like to live and experience a spatio-temporal world. The themes correlate with the structure experimentation seen in the 1920s regarding questioning time and spaces within time. Like the music of the Jazz Age, these texts ebb and flow, weaving the

narrative notes across an improvised tune. Time becomes an instrument alongside space, as Mikhail Bakhtin described in (“Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel”).

Novels continued to be fascinated with time, the moment of becoming cognizant of time passing, and how space and setting are reliant upon the narrative’s representation of time. Later works of the 20th century into the 21st century also focus on not seeing time as linear but merely a construct of chronology. Works like Ray Bradbury’s 1957 *Dandelion Wine*, for instance, reflected on themes of nostalgia, aging, and what a human’s relationship really is with time. His novel set in the summer of 1928, showcases a 12-year-old boy, Douglas Spaulding, who witnesses the world changing and aging around him. The stories of an old man are “time machines” and thematically reflect how a narrative (or in his case a “story”) is transported both to another time *and* another realm of space (Bradbury). The Happiness Machine (a man’s attempt at creating a machine that can make people happy through the senses) reflects on the decade of the 1920s, of experimenting and trying to depict life experience (Bradbury). Apart from the symbols, each character Douglas meets helps shape him, yet as the summer goes on, Douglas is simultaneously fixated on summer ending, friends leaving, and getting older/growing up. Like Bakhtin’s chronotope of the road, Douglas is on the road of his life in Green Town. However, it is through the web of other characters’ reflection that Bradbury explores the simultaneity of past, present, and future. Scholar Marvin Mengeling notes in the journal article “ ‘Ray Bradbury’s ‘Dandelion Wine’: Themes, Sources, and Style’ ”:

But Bradbury has said, ‘A man cannot possibly speak futures unless he has a strong sense of the past...’ [he] does not advocate a return trip down memory lane for reasons of sentiment, to moon over the loss of some imagined golden age [ie. the 1920s], but so that we [readers] have a firmer perspective for our necessary move into a golden future. (883)

Nonlinear plots of the 1920s, like those by Toomer and Cather, may have paved the way for modern and postmodern works that also portray a character's consciousness grappling with time, nonlinear and/or linear.

Additional remarks and notes

¹ With a new sense of freedom, “the automobile offered an almost universally available means of escaping temporarily” (Allen 109).

² The status of America, Allen further describes as “young country, with enormous resources in materials and in human energy and with a wide domestic market, was ready to take advantage of this situation. It had developed mass production to a new point of mechanical and managerial efficiency” (144).

³ “Through Outland's studies...he had been able to experience afresh things that had grown dull with use...To share his thoughts was to see old perspectives transformed by new effects of light” (Cather Book III, Ch 1). Moreover, Cather writes, “...first nature could return to a man, unchanged by all the pursuits and passions and experiences of his life: untouched even by the tastes and intellectual activities which have been strong enough to give him distinction among his fellows” (Book III, Ch 2).

⁴ “The design of the novel—(this being a work that repeatedly, as in Tom's description of the architecture of the Cliff City as ‘sculpture,’ proposes the appropriateness of interdisciplinary labeling)—strikingly evokes aestheticization, the rhetorical claim that form is meaning. Tom Outland's story is an enclosed narrative, framed by the Professor's search, or perhaps rather his

refusal to search, even internally: such a structure of itself intimates that the answer, certainly as to the nature of the Professor's problem, and perhaps its solution, lies within, at the novel's protected core" (Wilson 66).

⁵ Tower for "astronomical observations"... "I am inclined to think that your tribe were a superior people. Perhaps they were not so when they first came upon this mesa, but in an *orderly* and secure life they developed considerably the arts of peace" (Cather Book II, Ch 5, italics mine).

⁶ " "But I never thought of selling them, because they weren't mine to sell—nor yours! They belonged to this country, to the State, and to all the people' " (Cather Book II, Ch 6). This conversation illustrates a conflict Tom Outland had when discovering the artifacts, and the professor's own opinions about this moment.

⁷ Industrialization: "During the nineteen-twenties, industry had become more mechanized, and thus more capable of producing on a huge scale than ever before" (Allen 296). Materialism: "The profound psychological reaction from the exuberance of 1929. Fundamentally, perhaps, the business cycle is a psychological phenomenon" (Allen 299).

Work Cited

- Allen, Frederick Lewis. *Only Yesterday: An Informal History of the 1920s*. 1931. Kindle ed., Harper Perennial Modern Classics, Open Road Media, 26 May 2015.
- “Anachronism.” *Merriam-Webster*, Merriam-Webster, www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/anachronism. Accessed 24 Apr. 2025.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail M. *Problems of Dostoevskys Poetics*. 1929. *Internet Archive*, 1984, <https://archive.org/details/bakhtin-mikhail-problems-of-dostoevskys-poetics-1984/page/6/mode/1up>. Accessed 24 April 2025.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail M. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, edited by Michael Holquist, Kindle ed., University of Texas Press Slavic Series Book 1, 1981.
- Barthes, Roland, and Lionel Duisit. “An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative.” *New Literary History*, vol. 6, no. 2, 1975, pp. 237–72. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/468419>.
- Bradbury, Ray. *Dandelion Wine*. 1957. Grand Master ed., Bantam Books, 1985.
- Cather, Willa. *Willa Cather On Writing: Critical Studies on Writing as an Art*. 1949. Kindle ed., Knopf, 1 May 2013.
- Cather, Willa. *The Professor's House*. 1925. Available from: [UCLA] *VitalSource Bookshelf*, Random House Digital Inc., 2011.
- Chatman, Seymour. “Genette’s Analysis of Narrative Time Relations.” *L’Esprit Créateur*, vol. 14, no. 4, 1974, pp. 353–68. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26280067>.

- Ditsky, John. “‘Listening with Supersensual Ear’: Music in the Novels of Willa Cather.” *The Journal of Narrative Technique*, vol. 13, no. 3, 1983, pp. 154–63. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30225071>.
- Duncan, Bowie. “JEAN TOOMER’S ‘CANE’: A MODERN BLACK ORACLE.” *CLA Journal*, vol. 15, no. 3, 1972, pp. 323–33. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44321573>.
- Genette, Gérard. *Narrative Discourse*. Translated by Jane E. Lewin, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York, 15orient, 1980, <https://15orient.com/files/genette-on-narrative-discourse.pdf>. Accessed 24 April 2025.
- Helbling, Mark. “Jean Toomer and Waldo Frank: A Creative Friendship.” *Phylon (1960-)*, vol. 41, no. 2, 1980, pp. 167–78. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/274969>.
- Herman, David. “Limits of Order: Toward a Theory of Polychronic Narration.” *Narrative*, vol. 6, no. 1, 1998, pp. 72–95. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20107136>.
- Kennedy, David M. “Revisiting Frederick Lewis Allen’s Only Yesterday.” *Reviews in American History*, vol. 14, no. 2, 1986, pp. 309–18. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2701862>.
- Lukács, Georg. “The Classical Form of the Historical Novel.” *The Historical Novel*. 1937. Translated from German by H. & S.M., Penguin Books, *Internet Archive*, <https://ia902200.us.archive.org/5/items/in.ernet.dli.2015.65818/2015.65818.The-Historical-Novel.pdf>. Accessed 24 April 2025.
- Luzzi, Joseph. “The Rhetoric of Anachronism.” *Comparative Literature*, vol. 61, no. 1, 2009, pp. 69–84. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40279437>.

Mengeling, Marvin E. "Ray Bradbury's 'Dandelion Wine': Themes, Sources, and Style." *The English Journal*, vol. 60, no. 7, 1971, pp. 877–87. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/813204>.

Rusch, Frederik L. "Form, Function, and Creative Tension in Cane: Jean Toomer and the Need for the Avant-Garde." *MELUS*, vol. 17, no. 4, 1991, pp. 15–28. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/467265>.

Thomas, Heather. "American Fads and Crazes: 1920s: Headlines & Heroes." *The Library of Congress*, 24 Jan. 2023, blogs.loc.gov/headlinesandheroes/2023/01/american-fads-and-crazes-1920s/#:~:text=Scott%20Fitzgerald%20for%20coining%20the,and%20the%20%E2%80%9C%20Roaring%20Twenties.%E2%80%9D.

Toomer, Jean. *Cane*, edited by Rafia Zafar, 1923. Kindle ed., *A Library of America eBook Classic*, 1 Jan. 2019.

Vlasov, Eduard. "The World According to Bakhtin: On the Description of Space and Spatial Forms in Mikhail Bakhtin's Works." *Canadian Slavonic Papers / Revue Canadienne Des Slavistes*, vol. 37, no. 1/2, 1995, pp. 37–58. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40870668>.

Waldo, Frank. Foreword. *Cane*, by Jean Toomer, edited by Rafia Zafar, 1923. Kindle ed., *A Library of America eBook Classic*, 1 Jan. 2019.

Wasserman, Loretta. "The Music of Time: Henri Bergson and Willa Cather." *American Literature*, vol. 57, no. 2, 1985, pp. 226–39. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2926064>.

Wilson, Anna. "Canonical Relations: Willa Cather, America, and The Professor's House." *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, vol. 47, no. 1, 2005, pp. 61–74. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40755427>.

Woodress, James. "The Uses of Biography: The Case of Willa Cather." *Great Plains Quarterly*, vol. 2, no. 4, 1982, pp. 195-203. *DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln*, https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/1638/?utm_source=digitalcommons.unl.edu%2Fgreatplainsquarterly%2F1638&utm_medium=PDF&utm_campaign=PDFCoverPages.

Works Consulted

Bash, James R., "Willa Cather and the Anathema of Materialism." *Colby Quarterly*, vol. 10, no.

3, Sept. 1973, pp. 157-168. *Digital Commons*,

<https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq/vol10/iss3/6/>.

Barlow, Daniel. "Literary Ethnomusicology and the Soundscape of Jean Toomer's 'Cane.' "

MELUS, vol. 39, no. 1, 2014, pp. 192–211. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24569897>.

Beal, Wesley. "The Form and Politics of Networks in Jean Toomer's 'Cane.'" *American Literary*

History, vol. 24, no. 4, 2012, pp. 658–79. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23358449>.

Goethe Johann Wolfgang Von. "Goethe's Participation in Manzoni: [Abstract]: 1827." *1827*

Goethe: Theilnahme Goethe's an Manzoni, LyrikTheorie, 23 May 2024,

www.lyriktheorie.uni-wuppertal.de/lyriktheorie/texte/1827_goethe1.html.

Hart, Clive. "'The Professor's House': A Shapely Story." *The Modern Language Review*, vol. 67,

no. 2, 1972, pp. 271–81. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3722310>.

Kodat, Catherine Gunther. "To 'Flash White Light from Ebony': The Problem of Modernism in

Jean Toomer's Cane." *Twentieth Century Literature*, vol. 46, no. 1, 2000, pp. 1–19.

JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/441930>.

Smith, Jennifer J. "Writing Time in Metaphors." *The American Short Story Cycle*, Edinburgh

University Press, 2018, pp. 60–86. *JSTOR*,

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctt1tqxb3j.7>.

Further reading

- Haytock, Jennifer. "Looking at Agony: World War I in *The Professor's House*." *Cather Studies*, vol. 6, *Willa Cather Archive*, <https://cather.unl.edu/scholarship/catherstudies/6/cs006.haytock>. Accessed 24 April 2025.
- Karush, Deborah. "Bringing Outland Inland in *The Professor's House*." *Cather Studies*, vol. 4, *Willa Cather Archive*, <https://cather.unl.edu/scholarship/catherstudies/4/cs004.karush>. Accessed 24 April 2025.
- Kennedy, David M. "Revisiting Frederick Lewis Allen's Only Yesterday." *Reviews in American History*, vol. 14, no. 2, 1986, pp. 309–18. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2701862>.
- Sternberg, Meir. "Telling in Time (I): Chronology and Narrative Theory." *Poetics Today*, vol. 11, no. 4, 1990, pp. 901–48. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1773082>.
- Sternberg, Meir. "Telling in Time (II): Chronology, Teleology, Narrativity." *Poetics Today*, vol. 13, no. 3, 1992, pp. 463–541. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1772872>.