

2016

When Time Stops: A Loss of Identity or a Lack of Responsibility?

Emma M. Kuper

College of the Holy Cross, emkupe18@g.holycross.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://crossworks.holycross.edu/criterion>

 Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [English Language and Literature Commons](#), [Poetry Commons](#), and the [Rhetoric and Composition Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Kuper, Emma M. (2016) "When Time Stops: A Loss of Identity or a Lack of Responsibility?," *The Criterion*: Vol. 2018 : Iss. 1 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://crossworks.holycross.edu/criterion/vol2018/iss1/4>

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by CrossWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Criterion by an authorized editor of CrossWorks.

When Time Stops: A Loss of Identity or a Lack of Responsibility?

Cover Page Footnote

Winner of the 2016 Poetry and Poetics Prize.

Name:

Emma Kuper

Title:

When Time Stops: A Loss of Identity or a Lack of Responsibility?

Abstract:

Elizabeth Bishop's "In the Waiting Room", and Louis MacNeice's "Sunday Morning" follow a similar temporal structure as they begin with a normal passing of time, feature a hiatus or stretch of time in the central part of the poem, and then end with a return to normalcy. In addition, both poems include a connection among strangers during this stretched time period. However, Bishop's speaker finds this connection frightening, due to her resulting loss of identity. In contrast, MacNeice portrays this connection as positive, as all of humanity shares in a peaceful, joyous morning. This difference originates in the cause of the hiatus in each poem: for Bishop's speaker, a confusion of identity prompts this temporal shift, while in MacNeice's poem, a universal connection between strangers allows for a stretching of time.

When Time Stops: A Loss of Identity or a Lack of Responsibility?

Elizabeth Bishop's "In the Waiting Room", and Louis MacNeice's "Sunday Morning" mirror each other through the temporal structure of each of the poems. Both poems begin by anchoring the reader in one moment, then express a stretching or pause in time, followed by a return to normalcy to finish the poem. However, the emotions associated with this interruption in each poem are different. Although the poems follow a similar format, with a hiatus followed by the progression of normal time again at the end, the relationship with strangers in each of the poems determines the tone with which the disturbance is portrayed. For "In the Waiting Room", the speaker's sensation of being connected with other people and strangers is what causes the hiatus, because she is so distressed by this connection and at loss of her identity that she feels disconnected from time. In "Sunday Morning", however, a universal lack of responsibility and freedom to endless options causes the lapse, and the feeling that comes with this particular morning of the week connects all strangers. The differences in these two hiatuses appear due to the opposing portrayals of unusualness and familiarity in the two poems.

"In the Waiting Room" begins with the establishment of setting, especially time, to anchor the speaker in a specific moment and to illustrate what is familiar and normal to her. The title of the poem, combined with the first line, position the speaker in a precise scene: inside of a "Waiting Room", in "Worcester, Massachusetts" (l.1). The speaker later starts to place herself in time when she says "It was winter. It got dark/ early" (l.6). This objective description of the location and season shows that the setting is normal and even mundane to the speaker. In addition, her age helps to establish the era. When she points out the fact that she can read, she demonstrates herself to be a young child who perceives time differently than an adult (l.15). She describes having to wait for "what seemed like a long time", implying that there is a perceptual

difference between the speaker and other people (l.12). Taken together, these cues tie the speaker to a specific moment and location. This first section of the poem establishes the normal progression of time and the familiarity that the setting has for the speaker.

The speaker's description of the strangers in the waiting room and people in a magazine illustrate that unfamiliar and unusual things frighten her. She flips through the National Geographic magazine, looking at photos of people and places around the world. She describes a volcano with fearful language, such as "black", "full of ashes" and "rivulets of fire", demonstrating that she is afraid of this scene (ll.18-19). After looking through photos of tribal people, she says that the women's "breasts were horrifying", most likely because she has never seen naked, sagging breasts like these before (l.31). The women are foreign to her, and therefore they are frightening. The speaker's perception of the people with her in the waiting room is also ominous. She identifies them as a group that is separate from her—"grown-up people"—and depicts them as anonymous feet, clothing, and "shadowy gray knees" (l.8, l.68). There is no differentiation between these adults, but instead they become an inanimate mass of clothing and shapes. This language underscores the speaker's fear and nervousness caused by strangers and things that are alien to her.

The sound of the aunt's voice acts as a turning point in the poem, causing the speaker to think about the connection between her and her aunt, and more broadly and frighteningly, her connection with all of humanity. The single noise of her aunt crying out in pain triggers a detachment from normal time, which shapes the flow of the poem. This change begins when the speaker feels as though the cry from her aunt could have come from her own mouth, and realizes through this confusion that she is connected to her aunt somehow. The speaker describes this confusion of identity: "it was *me*:/ my voice, in my mouth./ Without thinking at all/ I was my

foolish aunt” (ll. 44-49). As she starts to panic, she realizes that she is connected with not only her aunt, but with all of the adults in the waiting room, and even the people in the *National Geographic*. As she thinks about this connection, she wonders about what “made us all just one” (l.83). The time in this passage seems to stand still, as the speaker loses all sense of her own identity. When she realizes that she is connected to all of humanity and is therefore unable to distance herself from strange and unfamiliar things, she feels panicked and is unable to position herself in time. Therefore, the hiatus is prompted by her connection with all of humanity, including people who are unfamiliar to her.

The speaker’s relation to the hiatus in this section is illustrated by the ways that she attempts to curb her panic. Initially, when her aunt first cries out, the speaker looks at the date on the front of the National Geographic magazine, extremely focused, “eyes glued to the cover” (l.51). The date is the one piece of information that she pays attention to as she begins to feel her sense of self slipping away. This details reveals how this passage of the poem involves both an identity crisis and a discontinuity of time. She thinks about her age and birthday, desperately trying to anchor herself: “I said to myself: three days/ and you’ll be seven years old” (ll.54-55). When she is unable to think about herself in relation to time anymore, her full panic occurs, and time seems to pause. She says, “I knew . . . that nothing stranger could ever happen” (ll.72-74). She feels as if she is falling, and cannot place herself in a moment or location to stop this fall. Triggered by the realization of her connection with strangers and unfamiliar people, the speaker’s inability to place herself in time causes a gap or pause in the middle of the poem.

The poem ends with the resuming of normal time, in which the speaker finds relief from her previous fears in the dullness and normality of the setting. She finally escapes from the “black wave” of fear that is clouding her thoughts when she centers herself back in the waiting

room (1.92). The final stanza runs through facts about the setting to reestablish the normal progression and sense of space: “The War was on. Outside,/ in Worcester, Massachusetts,/ were night and slush and cold” (ll.95-97). This dull and factual list comforts the speaker because it shows that she has once again remembered the date and setting surrounding her. The last two lines, “it was still the fifth/ of February, 1918” sum up this progression through the poem (ll.98-99). The poem starts on February 5th, and time feels normal to the speaker, then her internal crisis creates an interruption, and finally it resumes again to continue on the same day of the same month. This use of “still” is important because it implies that this progression has not changed for everyone else, even though it seemed to from the speaker’s point of view. The final description of the setting and time further illustrate the idea that familiarity comforts the speaker, and ultimately allows her to regain calm.

Similarly to “In the Waiting Room”, MacNeice’s “Sunday Morning” begins by placing the reader in time and space, but instead of establishing a definition of normalcy, it immediately illustrates how this moment is different from the norm. Two activities—practicing piano and fixing a car—take center stage at the beginning of the poem. Even though these endeavors are objectively mundane, the language used to describe them contradicts this idea. The piano notes are compared to silvery fish that “vanish with a wink of tails” and fixing the car is not simply a chore—instead “man’s heart expands” to pursue this activity (1.2-3). MacNeice describes both of these tasks with flowery language, making it that clear that there must be another factor that makes them different than normal. The first place-holder in time for this poem acts as an answer to the question of what this other factor might be. “For this is Sunday morning”, the speaker finally announces, “Fate’s great bazaar” (1.4). This striking line establishes the connection between this particular morning of the week and the special atmosphere it brings. Mirroring the

opening of “In the Waiting Room”, time and space are carefully established, but where Bishop demonstrates ordinariness, MacNeice illustrates unusualness and excitement.

References to people in “Sunday Morning”, along with the use of second person, demonstrate that the freedom that comes with this time of the week connects all strangers. Throughout the poem, people are alluded to by the activities they are engaged in, rather than any physical trait or defining feature. This creates an anonymity that includes all of humanity by not defining a particular group. Later on in the second stanza, use of second person pulls the reader into this group of people while also using language that could be directed at anyone and everyone. MacNeice repeats the word “you” four times in the second stanza, including the reader in a universal group with statements such as “Take corners on two wheels until you go so fast /That you can clutch a fringe or two of the windy past,” (ll.17-18). Here, mankind is connected, but unlike “In the Waiting Room”, this connection does not induce fear and panic. Instead, the connection is positive, because everyone shares in “Fate’s great bazaar”, meaning that in this moment in time, all of the options of what to do with one’s life seem to be laid out, equally available to be chosen (1.4). Strangers everywhere are linked by the freedom of this choice and the ability to do whatever activity makes them happiest, no matter if it is particularly productive or not. Therefore the connection between strangers in this poem is entirely different than in “In the Waiting Room”, because it is portrayed positively.

In contrast to Bishop’s poem, the stretch in time in “Sunday Morning” stems not from a crisis of identity, but from the freedom that this morning brings. Not only does this lack of commitment link all strangers together, it also changes the progression of this morning. This one morning might be stretched into a “week of time”, or “A small eternity” (1.9-10). This is because on a Sunday morning nobody feels the time pressures that they normally experience. The reader

is asked to “Regard these means as ends” in this special moment of the week (1.5). The activities on this morning are not played out for the purpose of reaching some higher goal as they normally are, but merely for the enjoyment of the experience itself. Without these goals and deadlines that are normally present, humanity can enjoy a moment that feels ageless, and even re-experience similar moments from “the windy past” (1.8). The hiatus in this poem sharply contrasts that of “In the Waiting Room”, because it arises from a naïve and commitment-free feeling, rather than one of frightening realization and fear. Instead of losing a sense of identity, people in MacNeice’s poem lose a sense of responsibility and are in touch with what makes them happy—a sensation that feels unending.

Interestingly enough, just like “In the Waiting Room”, a specific sound also serves as a key turning point in “Sunday Morning”. However, instead of triggering a loss of the grip on time, as the aunt’s cry does in Bishop’s poem, the sound of swallowing and church bells signal the end of the hiatus and the return to normal time. After describing the freedom and everlasting feeling of this morning, a transition begins with “But listen” (1.11). Negative language such as “gulps” and “skulls’ mouths” describe the sounds to listen for (1.11-12). The most important sound is the church bells ringing for a morning mass. Instead of describing them as joyful, as they are usually depicted, the speaker compares them to tireless, mechanical “skulls’ mouths” (1.22). This comparison is a signal that the happy freedom of the morning is coming to a close, and everyone dreads what comes next. In contrast with the relief that came with the return to normal time in “In the Waiting Room”, this return in “Sunday Morning” is so dreadful that it is even compared to death through association with the skulls. The final lines of the poem further this point, saying that no matter what pleasurable activities one might practice on Sunday mornings, nothing allows humanity a true “Escape from weekday time” (1.14). Here, a clear

distinction is made: there is the special Sunday morning time, and then there is the monotonous weekday time. While Sunday mornings allow a lapse in time through the universal freedom that they give people, weekdays carry the full weight of time and all of the commitments and deadlines that come with it. This return to normalcy is not met with relief, and instead is described by the way it “deadens and endures” (l. 14). The Sunday morning connection with strangers is broken, as everyone must go on with their normal lives and leave the freedom and promise of this morning until next week.

Although these two poems share a commonality in the way that time pauses and then resumes at the end, many other aspects of the poems, such as the overall emotions associated with the discontinuity, and the way that strangers are interconnected contrast each other sharply in the two works. While the normalcy and familiarity are the positives in “In the Waiting Room”, they become the negatives in “Sunday Morning”. Instead of comfort for a young girl who fears the unknown, these attributes are portrayed as tiring and dreadful in contrast to the freedom of a Sunday morning. At the heart of the difference between these poems lies the cause of the hiatus. In Bishop’s poem, a frightening loss of self through the eyes of a young child triggers this pause. In MacNeice’s poem, humanity’s shared forgetting of time because of the perceived lack of responsibility causes a hiatus. These poems illustrate two universal human experiences that we all are familiar with: the feeling that time is not relevant when we’re having a joyful, stress-free experience, and, on the other end, the feeling that time has stopped because we are so caught up in our own anxious or fearful thoughts that we have no regard for the outside world. The human sense of time can be an unreliable measure, and both Bishop and MacNeice illustrate this concept in contrasting ways.

Works Cited

Bishop, Elizabeth. "In The Waiting Room." *Geography III*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008, pp. 159–

161.

MacNeice, Louis. "Sunday Morning." *PoemHunter.com*, 3 Jan. 2003,

www.poemhunter.com/poem/sunday-morning-2/.