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# The Winged Chariot and the Harmonic Oscillator: Objective Time and Subjective Human Being in John Green's '*The Fault in Our Stars*'

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## Abstract

The main objective of the present study is to examine with particular reference to John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars*, the lived experiences of two characters- Hazel Grace and Augustus Waters- in 'time.' Here what is considered is the everyday experience of time- one mediated by cosmological regularities and recurring social patterns. What makes the study interesting is the fact that these two characters are cancer patients and how they struggle to live up to the expectation of a clock-ruled world despite instances of timelessness into which their peculiar disease drags them. The objective time is most often a hurdle which they are forced to surmount to find a space for them in the society.

**Keywords:** Time, Cosmology, Subjectivity

## Introduction

Time and space have always occupied a central position in human thought throughout the centuries. Whether it is philosophical musings, religious doctrinal divides or scientific quantifications, the time-enigma has been a vital stimulant to human thought. In the search for a coherent picture of the world and time, one confronts a bewildering range of disparate and endlessly fascinating ideas in philosophy, science, art and culture, religious belief and the ordinary commonsense of everyday life. Before the plunge into these troubled waters let attention linger on the shore awhile and rest assured in the time of our "everydayness" (Heidegger 3). It is the determinate clock-time not subject to change through external influence, in which an identical temporal sequence is constantly repeated, and which measures time in terms of the duration of an event compared with identical sequences

on the clock (Heidegger 4). In this commonsense conception of time we assume that there is only one time-series, it does not speed up or slow down. Moreover, the relations of simultaneity between any two events are the same for everybody (Smith and Oaklander 164). It is as if to conceive of an irreversible 'arrow of time' giving a certain linearity and direction to any course of events, and thus to the way we think of life.

It was with the dawn of the modern industrial age that measurement of time became a daily need. It marched with the emergence of the 'mass man'- literate, urbanized and leading a life measured by the hours and the minutes. As urbanization progressed apace, the need for a public time increased, and the use of clocks and watches became commonplace. This 'objective' time cannot, however, exist without a subjective human cognition the vicissitudes of which are difficult to formulate: "all humans tend to apprehend time through its discrete measurements: days, weeks, years, as well as the way it is imposed on us by the regularity of work schedules, railway timetables, licensing hours" (Cobley16). In the usual complacency of living within 'time,' which gives life an easy causal sequence and coherence, one shrugs off any thought to the contrary.

The issue of time as a mental construct, not a pre-existing universal threads the history of human thought, Eastern and Western (Davies 23). Hark to the sixteenth century mystical poet Angelus Silesius:

Time is of your own making,  
its clock ticks in your head.  
The moment you stop thought  
time too stops dead. (Davies 23)

In such thinking, time evolving as a linear progression of past-present- future would be a mere convenient equation

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to interpret history or the world. To St. Augustine, it becomes a recognition that “time past, time present and time future exist not just in the mind of man but as the essence of the mind of man, in the form of the interaction of memory, perception, and anticipation or desire” (Jaques 23). There has been a long philosophical tradition of identifying time with the ‘consciousness of time,’ and with individual consciousness. Even the more recent interpreters like Bergson and Husserl do not break away from the tradition. Bergson speaks of the “qualitative duration as seen exclusively by the deeper self,” while Husserl reduces the problem of time to that of the “phenomenology of the consciousness of time” (Gurvitch 35).

The main objective of the present study is to examine with particular reference to John Green’s *The Fault in Our Stars*, the lived experiences of two characters— Hazel Grace and Augustus Waters- in ‘time.’ Here what is considered is the everyday experience of time- one mediated by cosmological regularities and recurring social patterns. What makes the study interesting is the fact that these two characters are cancer patients and how they struggle to live up to the expectation of a clock-ruled world despite instances of timelessness into which their peculiar disease drags them. The objective time is most often a hurdle which they are forced to surmount to find a space for them in the society.

**Taming the Time**

For an ordinary human self time is inextricably bound with the everyday encounter with life. Right from his early years, he is fine tuned into the rhythms of the chiming clock. There is what is called a cosmological time revealed by the positions of the sun and the rising and residing of waves. Hence, for a common man, it is ‘motion’ that induces a sense of the most enigmatic of all concepts- time. Now, the question is whether it is the motion of the planets and stars or the hands of a clock that determines the perception of time. Sadly, in the modern world it is the latter which plays the pivotal role. The entire world appears to be conditioned by the to and fro motion of a pendulum.

Modern man cannot do without a consciousness of public time. In the age of globalization and nanotechnology, consciousness of time is deeply embedded in the human psyche. Ours is a civilization that is conditioned by an acute consciousness of time. It is

actually a mindset created by the highly mechanized world of today. Our subjective experience often contradicts this notion. Marshall McLuhan comments:

As a piece of technology, the clock is a machine that produces uniform seconds, minutes, and hours on an assembly line pattern. Processed in this uniform way, time is separated from the rhythms of human experience. The mechanical clock, in short, helps to create the image of a numerically quantified and mechanically powered universe. ... time measures not by the uniqueness of private experience but by abstract uniform units gradually pervades all sense life, much as does the technology of writing and printing. Not only work, but also eating and sleeping came to accommodate themselves to the clock rather than to organic needs. As the pattern of arbitrary and uniform measurement of time extended itself across society, even clothing began to undergo annual alteration in a way convenient for industry. (MacLuhan135–36)

Thus the industrial man had a drastically different consciousness of time compared to that of his ancestors.

In the present novel under study, *The Fault in Our Stars*, there are obvious references to this modern conception of time. This chapter therefore attempts to portray the lived experience of the characters, chiefly Hazel and Gus, in ‘time’. Here by ‘time’ what is referred to is the ‘tamed time’, one regulated by clocks and habits. The very opening sentence of the novel presents this obsession with time.

Late in the winter of my seventeenth year, my mother decided I was depressed, presumably because I rarely left the house, spent quite a lot of time in bed, read the same book over and over, ate infrequently, and devoted quite a bit of my abundant free time to thinking about death.(Green 3)

Here a deviation from the well knit everyday routine is considered an aberration on time from the part of

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Hazel. Her mother's chiding "Hazel, you're a teenager. You're not a little kid anymore. You need to make friends, get out of the house and live your life" (7), is a reminder for the young girl of the process of growing up. Time thus gains a metaphorical significance, one that acts as the mouthpiece of the conventions and rules of an 'age.'

The weekly support group Hazel and Gus attend is a meeting place where the importance of making the best of one's time and life is repeatedly reminded. "Living our best life today" (14) is the "mantra" with which the group bids farewell. Quietly Hazel observes a competition, a struggle for existence, among the members. She imagines the survival possibilities of the members, like, "a 20 percent chance of living five years, the maths kicks in and you figure that's one in five... so you look around and think, as any healthy person would: I gotta outlast four of these bastards"(5).

Gus unlike Hazel is adamant in casting his mark upon the sands of time. For him, a heroic life is one that is worthy of living. What he fears the most is "oblivion" (12). But Hazel had an answer for his fears which she borrows from her favourite book *An Imperial Affliction*, a fictional book by a fictional author Peter Van Houten.

There will come a time when all of us are dead. All of us. There will come a time when there are no human beings remaining to remember that anyone ever existed or that our species ever did anything...Everything that we did and built and wrote and thought and discovered will be forgotten....There was time before organisms experienced consciousness and there will be time after. (Green 13)

It is man's desperate yearning to outlive time that is evident in Gus's attitude towards life and the way he values a fruitful living. He is a representative of the modern man who ponders over time machines and ambrosial food. However a remarkable change is visible at the later stage of his life where he admits Hazel's vision of life. In a letter to Peter Van Houten, he writes "The real heroes anyway aren't people doing things; the real heroes are the people NOTICING things, paying attention. The guy who invented the smallpox vaccine didn't actually invent anything. He just noticed that people with cowpox didn't get smallpox" (312).

From the early years of civilisation, human beings attached significance to specific dates and seasons by bringing in religious rituals and social festivities. It is another means of establishing connections with time and space. The cosmological time is in a way socialised. Hazel's mother's exclamation "It's Thursday, March twenty-ninth!" (40) is an evidence of the time-bounded working of the modern psyche. It is Hazel's thirty-third half-birthday. In her case it is all the more dramatic as for a dying person, each day amounts to a year and hence her mother's excitement is justifiable. At a later instance the mother asks again "Hazel, Do you know what today is?" (305). Here she boasts of July fourteenth, Bastille Day. We too are no different as all the three sixty-five days in our calendar are devoted to historical events and personages.

Also time is captured in utmost precision all throughout the novel. Each passing second on the clock paralleled with the cosmological 'motion' is registered. Kaitlyn, the narrator's friend "had the kind of packed social life that needs to be scheduled down to the minute." In her birthday greetings she pinpoints their meeting time to the exact minute- "Awesome sauce. Happy Half Birthday. Castleton at 3.32?" (41).

There is the wonderful experience and celebration of biological time too. Though shared as a casual reference by Van Houten's secretary Lidewij, it has great relevance in the life of these two cancer kids. At Houten's house the secretary asked "would you care for some breakfast?" wherein Houten interrupted saying "it is far too early for breakfast." Then Lidewij replied "well, they are from America, Peter, so it is past noon in their bodies" (183). Though only a fine play of words, it has some crucial questions underneath it with regard to the experiencing of time within the human body. Whether time is experienced alike by persons under the same roof ; the very query leads us to the assumption that each body is a clock running slightly slower or faster than the other. Gus finds a possibility in this varying experience of time. Upon watching the setting sun, Gus said "The risen sun too bright in her loosing eyes," a line from *An Imperial Affliction*. When Hazel reminded him that it is not a rising sun, he answered "It's rising somewhere" (148). His further reasoning opens up a new avenue, turning the flight into a journey overpowering time.

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Observation: It would be awesome to fly in a superfast airplane that could chase the sunrise around the world for a while. Also I'd live longer. We age slower when we move quickly versus standing still. So right now time is passing slower for us than for people on the ground. (Green 149)

Human language is conditioned by the realities of time and space. Since language cannot be separated from thought, or, in other words, our thoughts can be formulated only in a language, time cannot be articulated in language or any other medium of human expression, independent of it. The fundamental difficulty (and advantage) is that man understands time in the same way he understands his language and himself: from within. Located indeterminately in a time-space continuum, man can offer definitions of time and space only in a manner that is incomplete, contradictory or tautologies. To restate the case: Space and time are two realities of human experience, two realities that surround all creation; yet they are so elusive that in ordinary human terms it is difficult to speak about them except in relation to empirical data connecting these to 'objects' and 'movement.' All human thought and language, all forms of expression directly or indirectly imply them, though we may not always be conscious of the fact.

The very fact could be easily illustrated by a glance into a simple debate that took place in Hazel's household with regard to "scrambled eggs being stuck with breakfast exclusivity." Hazel gets into fight asking "Why are breakfast foods breakfast foods?" and "Why don't we have curry for breakfast?" (137). Dad answers her telling "When you come back, we'll have breakfast for dinner. Deal?" Hazel seems least contended as she says "I Want to have scrambled eggs for dinner without this ridiculous construction that a scrambled egg- inclusive meal is *breakfast* even when it occurs at dinnertime" (138). Here Hazel in a way tries to topple down the predetermined assumptions, the established temporal connections between objects and the sense of time.

Things move and the movement can be measured in terms of distance covered in a certain period of time using a chronometer and this is what the common man understands as time. But such measurements differ greatly from our subjective perceptions of distance and time. In

ordinary discourse we cannot speak of one of these dimensions without reference to the other, which in turn shows the congruity between time and space as concepts. The deeply entrenched and inviolable idea of the linking of time and space through the phenomenon of motion was overthrown a hundred years ago by Albert Einstein and Hermann Minkowski who proposed the single concept of "space-time". In spite of that, even today, commonsense notion holds on to the idea of time and space, though aligned, as mutually exclusive. They are related to each other, through the phenomenon of motion, but they do not interact with each other. This view is sometimes referred to as the 'container view' which holds the notion that in and of them time and space are media in which all universe exists. They are fundamental to all existence. In everyday experiences and in the physical world as seen in the light of Newtonian physics, space and time are pervasive but distinct features of the physical world. Of course, measurements of time involve spatial measurements. The measurement of time by a pendulum is done by the number of oscillations the pendulum makes through space. The measurement of time is made possible by the spatial movement of the needle over the calibrated face of the watch or clock; the spatial position of the hands of the clock tells us what time it is.

In the early 20th century, Albert Einstein's Relativity Theory revolutionized the scientific and philosophical thinking about time and space. Einstein proposed time as a fourth dimension of space. This argument was newly generated by Einstein though it did not immediately become a comprehensible popular idea. The idea of simultaneity which it suggested was not easily understood. But it is possible to demonstrate this as a matter of common experience in the contemporary world, as Sharon Spencer does in the following observation:

. . . on earth today there exists virtually every historical period in the progressive history of man, ranging from the primitive culture of New Guinea to those societies whose technologies enable them to send men to walk on the moon. All these historical periods are *simultaneous*. What has changed is not their existence in time, but our *awareness* of their existence, as awareness that is made possible by the multiplication of perspectives achieved

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by cameras, radios, television, and tape recorders. Every location in space, every *lieu*, is infused with its own time, or simultaneity of time. In an important sense time has lost its meaning apart from its aspect as a function of space as perceived by some individual from a changing point of view. (Spencer xix – xx)

In the novel too Hazel and Gus makes a historical survey of Amsterdam and particularly Anne Frank's museum, though quiet unknowingly. The cabdriver said "Many of the canal houses date from the Golden age, the seventeenth century. Our city has a rich history, even though many tourists are only wanting to see the Red Light District" (157). At the museum, they watched a video about Jews in Holland and the Nazi invasion and the Frank family. It appears as if everything still exists intact in that building. History is no more an oblivion. It is as alive as it was. Even though Hazel feels discomfort in climbing up the stairs, she feels "I owed it to her- to Anne Frank" (199).

**Conclusion**

A crucial observation about human perception of time is that we normally are not able to perceive 'pure time' that is, time cannot be perceived independently of space and motion. Human life is lived 'in time and space.' Hence all our thought processes and the very business of life is conditioned by a 'within-timeness' and a 'within-spaceness.' In other words, it is impossible to stand outside of space and time and talk about them. They are *à priori*, because all ordered experience involves and presupposes them. Without them, sensations could not grow into perceptions.

The clock- ruled life is a curse of modern man. He is tamed by the to and fro motion of the pendulum. His sense of the world is informed by the habitual experiences of everyday events. It is this cosmological world of the two characters Hazel and Gus that is portrayed in this chapter. Here the 'bare life' of the characters as ordained by the rules of the society is presented in its genuineness.

Also the struggle that they face in the 'battle' which is unique to them makes their condition all the more problematic.

The chapter thus focuses on the way life is conditioned by the cosmological everyday and commonsensical notions of time. This time is more or less objective, preordained and informed by habits and familiarity. Even there is an inbuilt historical sense in identification with objects and places. What one could safely assume from the experiences of Hazel and Gus is that this 'life' is very much alien to their existence and hence tiresome.

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