



## CHRONOTOPIC ANALYSIS IN LORRAINE HANSBERRY'S "THE DRINKING GOURD"

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### ABSTRACT

Bakhtin's "chronotope" is a narrative time concept underlining that time cannot be understood without a spatial dimension: time and space are interconnected. In Greek 'chronos' means time and 'topos' means place. Bakhtin wanted to find a chronotope in different literary genres, which gave characters most freedom and creativity. Chronotope (space-time) bridges plot and narrated events with the real world. He called the lived time as- real time, historical time or horizontal time. In the historical time, the experience of the individual flows on with every new piece of information brought up by history. Time and again, the past is integrated in the current moment of consciousness. A chronotope plays a significant role in texts to expose the nature of events and actions and exemplifies the texts relation to their social and political sphere.

Bakhtin's belief in the concept of time which creates the illusion that the past always determines the present has been adhered by the renowned playwright Lorraine Hansberry. She has attempted to take the audience from the existing moment to a virtual re-arrangement of the past. The chronotopic exposition depicted by her asserts that drama is not a linguistic analysis but remains to be an inter-disciplinary one with the confluence of history and literature imbued with dramaturgies. Bakhtin's theory of chronotope is applied to study more on the relationship between the play and its contemporary life. Lorraine Hansberry's significant creation *The Drinking Gourd* (1960) explores a phenomenon reported historically and one that circulated often in African American oral tradition.

**Keywords:** Chronotope, space-time, Bakhtin, Hansberry, text, interconnected

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### INTRODUCTION

One of the most prominent demonstrations could be found in the category of time-space, introduced by the physicist Albert Einstein in the first decade of the twentieth century which was taken up by Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin for his concept of chronotope. In the introduction to his article titled '*Forms of Time and of the Chronotope*

*of the Novel'* written in the 1930s, this Russian thinker defines it as:

We will give the name *chronotope* (literally, 'time space') to the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature. This term is employed in mathematics, and was introduced as part of Einstein's Theory of

Relativity. The special meaning it has in relativity theory is not important for our purposes; we are borrowing it for literary criticism almost as metaphor. (Bakhtin 84)

The Bakhtinian concept defines time and space as inseparable. According to Bakhtin, it is time that is given priority and is regarded as a synonym with history. For Bakhtin, this concept of chronotope which is literally time-space is a matter of defending 'positive conceptions of Knowledge.' Based on the notion of history greater emphasis is given to the body as a material reality. The concept of chronotope is introduced for the better understanding of the text and history.

The action of the play *The Drinking Gourd* is set in the 1850's. An enslaved person surreptitiously learns how to read and write. A white master or mistress discovers this 'forbidden, unlawful' activity, and the enslaved person is punished with blinding or the severing of the writing hand. Hansberry pictures Hannibal, who enslaved on a plantation in an unnamed southern state on the eve of the Civil War and in a time of increasing number of runaways, wants as urgently to know what the black squiggles on white pages mean as he wants to run away to freedom in the North. Hannibal unlocks the mystery of reading by exchanging his expertise on the banjo for lessons in literacy from Tommy, the ten-year-old younger son of his white master. Hannibal's refusal to work in the fields leads to his downfall when the black driver follows the 'The Drinking Gourd'.

Everett, Tommy's older brother considers the development of Hannibal, owing to the demonstration of his newly acquired skill as the grating of insults. He has already accused his father, the 'good' master of running the plantation as a "resort of slaves". "Truly outraged" and without hesitation, Everett orders the newly acquired overseer to blind Hannibal. Such occurrences though imagined are the evidences of historical realities of which folklore, history and literary texts are made. Lorraine Hansberry's letter dated 11 Jan 1964 to the journal *Village Voice* depicts the historical oppressive which she records relating to the slave punishments encountered by her blacks during slavery:

The slavocracy was neither gentle nor vague; it was a system of absolutism: he who stood up and preached "discontent" directly had his courageous head chopped off; his militant back flogged to shreds; the four points of his limbs fastened down to saplings--or his eyes gouged out....Learning to read or write was variously corporally and capitally punishable; and, of course, from the beginning of the slave trade all expressions of what might have been a unifying force among the New World Blacks, African cultural survivals, were conscientiously and relentlessly destroyed (148-149).

Instead of falling a prey to traditional stereotypes, many playwrights like Lorraine Hansberry turned to other uses of history. Well-informed by black people's quest for freedom throughout their history in America, and specifically by Civil Rights activity of the mid-twentieth century, Alice Childress, James Baldwin, Amiri Baraka, Ntozake Shange, Pearl Cleage, August Wilson, George Wolfe, and Susan – Lori Parks, cracked the mirror of history to reveal black folks who were not always grinning the Sambo grin.

Before 1960's, 'Sambo' prevailed in American culture as the cheerful and comical entertainer. This stereotypical image of the black male, which developed during the colonial period, extended into all regions and classes, pervading all levels of popular culture for over two centuries. It stands as an outstanding example of how American society has used oppressively. The roots of the name 'Sambo' were both African and Latino – from the Hausa of Western Africa was a name of dignity, meaning 'name of a spirit' or 'the second son'. But in the language of the Mende, also of Western Africa, it was a verb meaning 'to disgrace' or 'to be shameful'. English slave traders adopted 'Sambo' as a form of insulting term 'Zambo' meaning 'of mixed blood', 'bow-legged' or 'monkey'. Joseph Boskin was an historian and the author of many articles, book chapters, review essays and several books. He explained how these Sambo Cartoonists helped to perpetuate American racism in *Sambo: The Rise and Demise of an American Jester* (1986):

Operating within a system that clearly rewarded Jimcrow policies, cartoonists sought a form that could express black buffoonery...the majority of artists extended the form: lips were widened and rendered a rosy red; teeth sparkled with glistening whiteness; hair was nappy, short and frazzled; faces were glossy, a top bodies that were either shortened and rounded, or lengthened to approximate the monkey or ape (124).

Bakhtin's theories of chronotope is introduced to analyze how the narrative in *The Drinking Gourd* shifts from one conceptualization of time and space to another and how these shifts generate reformulations of fundamental ideas about identity, society and morality.

Hansberry's revolutionary spirit is displayed in her second play, *The Drinking Gourd*, set in the slave South. The playwright felt quite comfortable writing about the South and considered it her homeland. Her maternal and paternal grandparents and many relatives were Southerners whose history of South's violence did not leave Hansberry untouched. She was never allowed to forget that her uncle was one among others lynched in the infamous Elaine, Arkansas riot of 1919. The Elaine, Arkansas riot in 1919 was a pivotal event because, it typified the conditions of blacks in the United States after World War I. The riot illustrates the inequities of the sharecropping system and the extreme racism that was rampant in the American South. Suspicions that American land owners have cheated on African American sharecroppers and tenant farmers have driven the creation of the Progressive Farmers and Householders Union (PFHU) to secure fair wages. The riot between African Americans attending a PFHU meeting and Americans from the Missouri-Pacific Railroad has led to the death of 200 African Americans and the indictment of 67 African Americans on September 30. Records of this and other atrocities in the South haunted Hansberry. Hansberry's vision was particularly shaped by the cruelties of the 1950s, including the legal lynching of Josephine Grayson's husband Francis Grayson who was one of the 'Martinsville Seven' that framed and executed on false rape charges in Virginia. There

were a group of seven African American men who were executed in the electric chair for the gang rape of a white woman in the state of Virginia, United States. They were arrested in 1949 and executed in 1951. It was the largest mass execution for rape that had been reported, and has been compared to lynching. Another cruelty was gouging out of the eyes of Mrs. Westry's son by policemen who subsequently fatally shot him on the operating table.

#### History of Slavery

Slavery in America began when the Dutch ship brought twenty African slaves to the North American colony of Jamestown, Virginia, in 1619, to aid in the production of such lucrative crops as tobacco. Slavery was practiced throughout the American colonies in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, and African American slaves helped build the economic foundations of the new nation. Some historians have estimated that six to seven million slaves were imported to the New World during the 18<sup>th</sup> century alone, depriving the African continent of some of its healthiest and ablest men and women. By the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, America's westward expansion, along with a growing abolition movement in the North, would provoke a great debate over slavery that would tear the nation apart in the bloody American Civil War (1861-65). Though the Union victory freed the nation's four million slaves, the legacy of slavery continued to influence American history, from the tumultuous years of Reconstruction (1865-77) to the civil rights movement that emerged in the 1960s, a century after emancipation.

Slave in the antebellum South constituted about one-third of the southern population. Most slaves lived on large farms or small plantations. Many masters owned less than fifty slaves. Slave owners sought to make their slaves completely dependent on them, and a system of restrictive codes governed life among slaves. They were prohibited from learning to read and write, and their behavior and movement was restricted. Many masters took sexual liberties with slave women, and rewarded obedient slave behavior with favours, while rebellious slaves were brutally punished. Slave revolts occurred within the system but few were successful. The slave revolt led by Nat Turner in

Southampton County, Virginia, in August 1931 terrified the white slaveholders. Turner's group around seventy five blacks murdered some sixty whites in two days. Supporters of slavery pointed to Turner's rebellion as evidence that blacks were inherently inferior barbarians requiring an institution such as slavery to discipline them. In the North, the increased repression of southern blacks would only fan the flames of the growing abolition movement.

*The Drinking Gourd*, a three-act drama, is a documentary on American plantation slavery narrated not from the white consciousness point of view but from the view of a black women's psyche. Hansberry suggests in this play that the South destroyed the way of life it sought to maintain or preserve because that way of life hinged upon the suppression of human beings, Afro-Americans. This play is an indictment against a society that perpetuated ignorance in blacks in order to cling to a rapidly-fading way of life. This provocative drama deals with the crimes of American slavery. Nemiroff states:

*The Drinking Gourd* goes for the gut: it takes on the system itself, requires that we examine ourselves, and what it implies is revolution. Revolution within and without. Not guilt but action. It shatters the myth that the Civil War was anything other than a tragic necessity, a revolution that had to be fought not out of some doubtful benevolence to the slaves but for the good of the whole nation. (LB 152-153)

Nemiroff asserts that *The Drinking Gourd* studies the limits of individual freedom within an evil (slavery) system. Hiram Sweet, the "master" in the play, becomes a victim because he wants to operate his plantation without working his slaves to death, but societal pressures force him to concentrate on material gain and to ignore the treacherous crimes against blacks on his plantation.

#### **Text and Real World-Interconnected**

The setting of *The Drinking Gourd* was the pre-Civil War (1815-1850) era which reflects Hansberry's personal commitment to equal rights and captures the revolutionary spirit of the 1950s and 1960s. In the 1950's the emerging black demand

for equality and protest against segregation and second-class citizenship would be reflected in the theatre. The impudent and courageous Hannibal, resembles the legendary African general of the same name. Hannibal tries to persuade other characters that it is not normal for one group of people to enslave another. He boldly informs Sarah that he cannot tolerate by remaining a slave and reminds her that to be a slave means is to be denying recognition as a human being. He also encourages Sarah to be rebellious. He rebukes his mother Rissa for her contentedness in a slavocracy.

At another incident, Hannibal mocks the black assistant to the overseer, Coffin, who feels proud to keep blacks suppressed. When this activist fails to stimulate the revolutionary spirit around him, he does not waft into passivity, instead he uses his own retaliatory tactics. Whenever he finds a chance, he reacts aggressively in damaging his master's possessions like breaking tools in order to slow up the production.

Reluctant to accept his place as a slave, Hannibal convinces his master's younger son to teach him to read and write.

Hannibal: ...time for my lessons.

Tommy: Play me another tune first, please, Hannibal?

Hannibal:...our 'rangement allus been strictly one lesson for one lesson. Ain't that right?...

Tommy: Oh, alright... Did you do the composition like I told you?

Hannibal: (With great animation, reaching into his shirt and bringing up a grimy piece of paper) Here. I wrote me a story like you said, suh!

Tommy: (unfolding it and reading with enormous difficulty the very crude printing) "The – Drinking – Gourd". (208)

His first intention is to free himself of illiteracy in order to extricate himself from the physical and emotional chains of slavery. Hannibal's life changes when he finds freedom in literacy, he becomes scornful of the world he sees. Hannibal's insight leads him to disregard the constraints of slavery and to yearn for a better life. Hannibal is very much like

Asagai in *A Raisin in the Sun* in his aggressiveness and rebelliousness.

The action in the play revolves around the Hiram Sweet family and its slaves, mainly Rissa, Hannibal, and Coffin. Hiram Sweet, the central white character, is a sympathetic man whose 'good intentions' towards his slaves are undermined by his son, Everett. Everett threatens to seize his father's position as master of the plantation because his father has a heart problem and his father's leniency toward the slaves has caused profits to diminish the slaves to become 'unmanageable'. One such unmanageable slave is Hannibal who has been scolded repeatedly by Coffin, an Uncle Tom, for breaking tools, for refusing to work quickly and for running off into the woods in every chance he gets. Rissa, Hannibal's mother and favourite slave of Hiram Sweet, begs her master to allow her son to be taken out of the fields and be placed in the Big House as a servant. Rejecting his mother's plans for him, Hannibal tells Rissa that he has learned to read and write and that he plans to try to escape to freedom.

Everett takes control of his father's plantation while Hiram recovers from a heart attack and immediately hires Zeb Dudley, a poor white, as overseer. Zeb whips Hannibal as an example to the other slaves. Coffin reports to Everett and Zeb that Hannibal is with Everette's younger brother, Tommy, instead of working in the field. When Everette discovers that Hannibal has manipulated Tommy into teaching him to read, he orders Zeb to gouge out Hannibal's eyes so that he would be free of the "disease of education."

Everett: (Truly outraged) You have used your master's own son to commit a crime against your master...There is only one thing I have ever heard of that was proper for an "educated slave." It is like anything else; when a part is corrupted by disease—one cuts out the disease. The ability in a slave is a disease.

Hannibal: (screaming at him...) You can't do nothing to me to get out my head what I done learned...I kin read!...(To Zeb) I kin read and you can't.

Everett: He has told the truth (To ZEB, coldly) As long as he can see, he can read...you understand me perfectly. Do it now. (210)

Eyes are the windows of the world, and Everett attempts to bar Hannibal from the free world that lies outside of the parameters of slavery. Everett takes away Hannibal's sight for fear that this rebel's vision will corrupt other slaves. Though Hannibal's body is shattered, his spirit remains rebellious. The blinding of Hannibal represents the inhumanity heaped upon blacks in the struggle for freedom. Wilkerson contends that "the gouging out of Hannibal's eyes suggests the moral bankruptcy of slavery" (66). Hansberry uses this play to argue against the present day institutionalized racism, which is rooted in slavery. Hansberry's empathy with the plight of blacks has led her to encourage blacks not to accept injustices that began during slavery and continue to be the focus of the struggle. She made it as her mission to tell the truth.

When Hiram goes into rage because Everett has turned the plantation into a place where merciless punishment is inflicted upon slaves, Macon Bullet tries to minimize the scene between Hiram and Everett by announcing that war between the states had broken out. Hiram predicts the amends to Rissa. Rissa, who prior to Hannibal's injury appears to be the 'Black Mammy' incarnate, turns on Hiram Sweet when he comes to console her, and she accuses him of being "master of some men and not at all of others" (215). Shortly after Hiram leaves Rissa's cabin, he has a heart attack, and Rissa ignores his cries for help. Not only does Rissa allow her master to die, but steals his gun from the house and helps her blind son and his girlfriend Sarah escape to freedom in the North.

Hansberry's Hannibal does not die from his wounds. Rather, he succeeds in transcending slavery for the short time that he read and wrote. More important he succeeds in transforming his mother's attitude. Rissa, usually Christian and long-suffering simultaneously feels proud and fearful when Hannibal reads from the Bible. Everett, the villain who ordered that Hannibal be blinded, may attempt to eradicate the effect of Hannibal's reading and

writing achievements, but they will always be written upon his mind.

Hannibal's achievements will also be written upon the minds and imaginations of the black audience who witness the play. They are witness to the fact that Hannibal defined himself in terms other than those coming from the warped imagination of his so-called master. That redefining of identity might inspire the blacks to similar attempts to define and free themselves. By refusing to accept the status of "slave" that has been carved out for him, Hannibal opens possibilities for self-definition that characterize many of the central figures of African American drama from the mid-twentieth century to the beginnings of the twenty-first century.

The revolt of Rissa the mother in this play stands parallel to many historical revolts. Slavery and Civil War have intrigued popular writers from the 1850s to the present day. In 1852, Harriet Beecher Stowe published *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, a bitter indictment of slavery. The cruel overseer, Simon Legree, the name has become synonymous with greed. His goal is to demoralize Tom and break him of his religious faith. The deferential Uncle Tom was a noble, long-suffering Christian slave. The syrupy Little Eva created by Stowe was a kind hearted white girl who believed in the idea of forgiveness and friendship. All these characters have become American folk figures. The book was published nine years before the beginning of the Civil War and was important in dramatizing the abuses of slavery to the American people.

In 1936, Margaret Mitchell published the runaway best-seller *Gone With the Wind* (1936), which depicts white interpretation of slavery and Civil War. The novel is Southern plantation fiction and it is written from the perspective of the slaveholder. Its portrayal of slavery and African Americans is controversial, as well as, its use of a racial epithet and ethnic slurs. However, the novel has become a reference point for subsequent writers about the South, both black and white.

Black history records the resistance of revolutionaries like Reverend Stephen Elliot of Georgia, the Reverend James A. Lyon of Mississippi and Edward A. Pollard of Virginia who lead a

movement for slavery reform. Their demands include,

Much of our modern-day abhorrence of slavery focuses on the physical brutality – whippings, physical mutilation, strapping a man's legs and arms to two saplings until the trees bent down in opposite directions, placing a surly slave in a stuffy, cramped "sweat-box." (Cheney 109)

### Conclusion

Lorraine Hansberry's *The Drinking Gourd* is an exceptional piece of drama because of her impartial treatment of the issues of slavery. Hansberry did not create black heroes and white villains, instead, blacks and whites are presented as victims of an institution that has to be destroyed. Nemiroff contends that it was Hansberry's fairness in the development of her characters in *The Drinking Gourd*. Through the play the *The Drinking Gourd*, Lorraine Hansberry through her literary aesthetics has brought out the confluence of reality with the historical oppression of the past and the present to serve as a caution for the future. The chronotopic investigation in this article exposes the nature of the events and actions, and exemplifies the texts relation to their social and political sphere.

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