

Deborah de Muijnck (ed.)

Troubling Time(s)

Questioning Prevailing Notions of Time
in the Study of Literature and Culture

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Deborah de Muijnck (ed.)

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**Troubling Time(s):
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INTRODUCTION: THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF LITERATURE IN CHALLENGING ERAS: TIME, TROUBLE, AND HOPE FOR THE FUTURE

DEBORAH DE MUIJNCK (JUSTUS LIEBIG UNIVERSITY GIESSEN)

Navigating Troubling Times through Literature

Shakespeare's iconic quote "The time is out of joint" (Shakespeare 2010, Act I, Scene V, p. 54) describes the moment when disturbances disrupt the temporal and moral fabric of the protagonist's perception of reality. This declaration is made in the wake of Hamlet's confrontation with his father's ghost, leading to the troubling revelation that his uncle Claudius murdered his father. It therefore represents an encounter that is not just temporarily unsettling, but which also fundamentally alters Hamlet's perception of reality.

The urgency and suitability of this quote becomes apparent when one critically reflects on the realities of 21st-century globalised societies. If we are to focus on the troubles that define contemporary times, the present era can be characterised by rapid technological advancements, global warming, social and cultural movements, global health crises, economic shifts, and changing socio-political landscapes. All these factors may urge individuals to reconceptualise their individual past and to feel increasingly insecure about the present and the future(s), inviting the impression of time and one's presence in it being out of joint. Digital media and seemingly constant interconnectedness enhance the immediacy of crises represented in the news, making individuals acutely aware of disruptions both near and far. As we are faced with complex ecological, political, and societal challenges on a sometimes-daily basis, it becomes imperative to look at the role which literature and the arts can play under such circumstances. A variety of new theories, methods, and approaches over the past decades in literature and narratology have already started to respond to these issues. The eudaimonic turn (cf. Antonovsky 1996, 1998; Pawelski and Moores 2014; Mittelmark *et al.* 2017; Nünning and Nünning 2020; Schläger 2020), for example, highlights how literature can serve as a toolkit toward a *good* life. Recent approaches in empirical ecocriticism (Schneider-Mayerson *et al.* 2023) analyse how certain types of stories raise ecological awareness, hoping to mitigate mid- and long-term change in consumerist behaviours. Studies in narrative empathy highlight the role of literature when it comes to considerations of gender and ethnicity, highlighting the potential of storytelling for the development of more equal and inclusive societies (Keen 2013, 2014; Harrison 2011; Hammond and Kim 2014). The field of Narrative Medicine successfully explores how storytelling may help patients come to terms with their diagnosis, supports medical personnel in their patient interactions, and thereby increases the life quality of those who give and those who receive medical care (Charon and Montello 2002; Charon 2008, 2017; Liao and Wang 2020). What all these approaches highlight is that

literature can serve as a compass throughout times of crisis, supporting individuals and societies on their journey toward a good life.

In this volume, we regard literature and culture as mirrors of society that may both represent, challenge, and transgress particular norms (Fenske, Hülk and Schuhen 2013; Link 2013). This collection is therefore a direct response to contemporary issues as we aim to highlight the intricate interplay between literature and conceptualisations of *time*, *trouble*, and ultimately, *troubling times* for the human experience. We target the following questions: How is time experienced, conceptualised, and represented in literature? How does time intertwine with the concept of trouble, especially during times of upheaval? And how do we delineate troubling times? Literature, as we argue in this volume, serves as a quintessential realisation mechanism for all three concepts. It invites readers to cognitively and affectively engage with particular challenges, hence offering individuals different alternative paths towards the conceptualisation and implementation of a life well lived, even when it seems that ‘the time is out of joint’.

The aim of this volume is generally of optimistic nature. Trouble may, of course, lead to resignation. However, as will be explored by the articles in this anthology, it may lead to resilience and eventually to more sustainable forms of living too. Apart from serving as mirrors of past and contemporary societies, literature and culture also represent the wishes and the potential for better futures and for alternative, present and upcoming realities. Therefore, troubling times lead to new reflections on past, present, and prospective times, not solely questioning prevailing notions of time and temporality, but also examining how time and corresponding troubles can be employed for a positive future.

The Cultural Anchoring of Time

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, time is defined as an “[i]ndefinite continuous duration regarded as that in which existence, and the sequence of events, takes place; the abstract entity which passes, goes by, or is consumed as events succeed one another, esp. in regard to the bringing about of anticipated developments, change, etc” (*OED online* 2023). It is, as stated by Ralf Schneider, “a fundamental dimension for the orientation of human activity and experience” (2021, p. 95). In this volume, we therefore conceptualise time as a network woven into the fabric of human experience, shaping our perception of past and present realities and the anticipation of possible futures. The authors of this volume highlight the profound implications of this temporal dimension, particularly with focus on its relation to the possibility of change and the resilience necessary to navigate successfully within a world that may sometimes seem dominated by troubles.

(Human) perception of time is not an objectively fixed, consistent, and coherent construct; while sensation and cognition of time generally carry strongly normative tendencies that are industrially (Assmann 2020) and heteronormatively (Bakhtin 1981; Lanser 2014; Dawson and Sykes 2019) anchored, recent approaches to queer time and temporality serve as illuminating lenses, through which we may scrutinise the multidimensional

mensional nature of temporal experiences (Butler 1993; Edelman 2004; Freeman 2010; Bradway 2021). Within this cultural rootedness of past, present, and (potential) future(s), time becomes a category of experience. It encompasses the cognitive metaphors of ‘losing’ and ‘gaining’ time, the realisation that ‘what’s past is past’, and the notion of working towards a ‘better future’. Moreover, time and conceptualisations of time may serve as vessels for creativity, a category which plays a fundamental role in experiencing and dealing with temporal phenomena. Through the lens of creativity, individuals may engage with the times as a canvas upon which they draw their interpretations of existence, reshape the perception of past experiences, and create a subjective world that may ultimately transcend the boundaries of normative temporality.

Hope here emerges as a category of time; it may light the way to various possible futures and highlight wishes and desires that motivate individuals despite temporary troubles. It serves as an active force in the face of misery, fostering the belief in a better future and countering alienation from the present into a more harmonious state of being. Essentially, this volume investigates the cultural anchoring of time, trouble, and troubling times and their pivotal role in shaping the human experience of living within this world.

Navigating Temporal Turmoil: Understanding the Complex Connection of Time and Trouble

Having explored the cultural anchoring of time and its impact on the human experience, we now shift our gaze towards the equally complex terrain of the concept of *trouble*. Defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as “the disturbance of mind or feelings” (*OED online* 2023), the concept is expanded in the volume to encompass, along with mental and emotional perturbations, physical disruptions. Thereby, we acknowledge the profound interplay of mind and body as highlighted by recent 4E approaches toward human cognition (Rowlands 2010; Hartner 2017; Caracciolo and Kukkonen 2021; de Muijnck *et al.* 2024).¹ Furthermore, *trouble* may be applied as a noun, an adjective, or as a verb, each manifestation highlighting the intricacies of the human experience and emotional states. As a noun, as shared above, it signifies distressing experiences, circumstances, or occurrences; as a verb, *trouble* embodies the actions of disturbance, agitation, interruption, and the stirring of emotions, illustrating the role of trouble as an agent that shapes human experiences (*OED online* 2023). Additionally, as an adjective, it finds resonance in historical writings, such as those of Chaucer, offering insights into how the perception and the agentic role of trouble has evolved over time (*OED online* 2023).

The encounter with trouble may lead to a sense of losing grasp of time, most extremely experienced during traumatic events that disrupt one’s temporal and emotional framework and the ability to remember certain events (Caruth 1996; Staniloiu and Markowitsch 2012;

1 The “4E” approach to cognition argues that “cognition does not occur solely in the head, but is also *embodied, embedded, enacted, or extended* by way of extra-cranial processes and structures” (Carney 2020).

de Muijnck 2022a, 2022b). Trouble may, however, also serve as a diagnostic lens, reflecting states of mind and being, and hence revealing the turbulences that affect individuals and groups. Beyond this diagnostic role, we can regard trouble as an activity, an agent with the power to disturb and disrupt and, furthermore, with the potential to prompt introspection and action, with regard to the concept of hope. In a more literal sense and as highlighted by the contributors of this volume, trouble in contemporary society is also connected to the concept of slow violence, as seen in the ever-growing threat of climate change which does not manifest as a single, cataclysmic event but gradually and slowly reveals the instability of our environment and threatens the wellbeing of this planet's inhabitants (cf. also Nixon 2013). Trouble, when viewed as an analytical framework, may in this respect reveal itself as a productive middle ground—one which may radicalise or resign individuals but at the same time creates space for dialogue, meaning-making, meaningful encounters, and valuable interpretations of future potential.

In the ever-evolving landscape of this world, it becomes paramount for scholars to understand the connection and complexities between time and trouble, as they offer insights into the human condition, and the potential for transformative action when confronted with turmoil. Literature has the remarkable capacity to serve as a lens through which readers can examine and navigate the interplay of time and trouble, both of which reflect (non-) human conditions and actively engage individuals in the process of meaning-making. It offers audiences a mirror through which they can relate to and find sense and meaning in the experiences of characters who are confronted with temporal emotional, mental, or physical tribulations, eventually supporting them in overcoming their own adversities. Moreover, fictional narratives may act as a catalyst for the creation of alternative realities, which can be, alongside with a temporal refuge, a motivation to transcend the confines of current problems (Heilman 1975; Martínez 2018). Literature empowers readers by giving them tools to navigate the turbulence of troubling times and, as a result, offering a platform for self-reflection and a roadmap to transformative action and enduring resilience. Furthermore, literature's enduring quality transcends the boundaries of time and space, enabling us to draw insights from the past and projecting them into the present (and potential futures).

Unravelling the Potential of Troubling Times: An Examination of Temporal Disarray and the Turn of the Times

Reminiscent of Hamlet's quote that "the time is out of joint", the concept of 'troubling times' becomes particularly relevant as it aligns with the prevailing turmoil of contemporary geopolitical landscapes. In this sense, 'troubling times' carries a nuanced double meaning that extends beyond its surface implication: On the one hand, it refers to periods of disarray, upheaval, and uncertainty as experienced during the ongoing wars between Russia and the Ukraine, as well as between Israel and the Hamas.² These conflicts,

2 This chapter was written in autumn 2023.