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Fragmentation and Reconstitution of Characters across Temporal Space in *Cloud Atlas*

David Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2004), 529 pp. £9.90.

David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* presents multiple plots across different eras set in contrasting geographical locations, superseding temporality. With his third novel, Mitchell collapses the boundaries between past, present, and future to progress an interconnectedness between characters across temporal space, thereby emphasizing the novel's narrative mobility.[1] It is in this way that Mitchell facilitates the reader's movement across spatiotemporal divides with each narrative's progression within the novel.[2] And, in doing so, he posits a "different kind of reader for every story" while stimulating "a single reader's fitful engagement with a text."[3] Despite being less than a decade old, the popularity of *Cloud Atlas* extends past the literary, as critics of Mitchell's most widely read novel contemplate subjects ranging from genetics and cloning to historiography, intertextuality, and the novel's narrative structure.[4]

The novel is divided into eleven parts across six narrative streams, allowing characters to repeatedly engage with one another through personal intertextual encounters, represented through mediums such as oral and written texts, music, and film. These streams are compiled to draw attention to the novel's framed narrative structure, which in turn, enact the interconnectedness between the main characters. Such interconnectivity serves to promote the wider-reaching emphasis on shared experiences between people across spatiotemporal and, arguably, cultural and social divides.[5] Each character is uniquely positioned in a time and space separate from the last but detached from the next.

These encounters give rise to the fragmentation, and later reconstitution, of characters across temporal space.

From a plot perspective, the six narratives include: *The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing*, set in the Chatham Islands during the mid-nineteenth century with American lawyer, Adam Ewing; *Letters from Zedelghem*, which takes place in Bruges, Belgium in 1931 with musician, Robert Frobisher; *Half Lives: The First Luisa Rey Mystery*, set in Buenas Yerbas, California in 1975 with journalist, Luisa Rey; *The Ghastly Ordeal of Timothy Cavendish*, set in present-day Britain with publisher, Timothy Cavendish; *An Orison of Sonmi~451*, set in Neo Seoul, Korea in 2144, with fabricant waitress, Sonmi~451; *Sloosha's Crossin' an Evrythin' After*, set in the Big Isle in 106 winters after the Fall and narrated by Valleysman, Zachry Bailey.

The novel's structure may be likened to that of a Russian nesting doll, as one narrative layer encases the next, before being encased by the layer preceding it.[6] In this way, *Cloud Atlas* provides the reader with one narrative that is abruptly "interrupted by the next until the sixth undivided narrative" brings those preceding it to a close.[7] Notably, each narrative needs the next in order create meaning, thereby establishing an interdependence between the novel's disparate parts, while bringing characters together across temporal space. This metaphor, that is used to describe the narrative structure of the novel, is considered by the character, Isaac Sachs, in part nine, where he explains his view of time:

> [There is] one model of time; an infinite matryoshka doll of painted movements, each 'shell' (the present), encased inside a nest of 'shells' (previous presents) I call the actual past but which we perceive as the virtual

> past. The doll of 'now' likewise encases a nest of presents yet to be, which I call the actual future but which we perceive as the virtual future.[8]

Despite such spatial separation, the novel uses various textual artifacts to join the characters across temporal space. Zachry Bailey describes this phenomenon in terms of being similar to the way "souls cross ages like clouds cross skies."[9] This movement of souls is evident in the plot, while being representative of the interconnectedness existing between characters as they discover links through various depictions of themselves. The novel's constant dissections across narrative streams serve as a vehicle for Mitchell to draw attention to how both the narratives and characters interweave with one another in various ways. These elements work together to "entangle, however minimally, the wider world" within the novel.[10] As such, this entanglement creates what Peter Childs and James Green describe as "a strong sense of human congruity, an interconnectedness and interdependency" as, each time, the narrative, which interrupts the previous one, relies on aspects from that narrative to fully develop.[11]

We see this theme of entanglement playing out in *Cloud Atlas* through the sequentially structured narratives across temporal space. During his stay at the Ayrs mansion in 1931 in Belgium, Robert Frobisher, the main character of the second part, stumbles across the journal of Adam Ewing, the protagonist from the first part of the novel. He never finishes reading the journal, and notes in a letter written to Rufus Sixsmith (that is later read by Luisa Rey) that "A half-finished book is, after all, a half-finished love affair."[12] In a way, Ewing lives on through Frobisher's re-reading of his journal. It is at this juncture that Frobisher finds the inspiration to complete the composition of his musical piece entitled *The Cloud Atlas Sextet*. Some years later, in 1973 in San Francisco, Luisa Rey reads Frobisher's letters written to Sixsmith. The reading of these letters between lovers, also separated across spatial

divides, aids Rey in tracking down Frobisher's musical composition but also allows Frobisher's memory to supersede temporality, as he 'exists' in Rey's re-reading of his letters, as well as through others' listening to *The Cloud Atlas Sextet*.[13]

In a London nursing home in 2012 (also Vyvyan Ayrs' old mansion and Frobisher's earlier residence), Timothy Cavendish discovers a manuscript of a novel based on Rey's story. Years later, in 2144, Sonmi~451 is exposed to the screenplay entitled *The Ghastly Ordeal of Timothy Cavendish.* Rey's lived experience continues through Cavendish's reading of her novel, while Cavendish's life endures through Sonmi~451's re-experiencing of it, in a sense, when she watches the film about his encounters. Sonmi~451's legacy, in turn, is ultimately preserved through her manifesto, as her words are kept alive through the faithful worship of the Valleysmen in Zachry's time years after its conception. Finally, Zachry's memory persists through his storytelling of tales to his unidentified audience, as these stories find preservation through being carried with them throughout their own lives as folklore. And so, the matryoshka doll metaphor ensues. These representations of self in the form of texts, film, or pieces of music, demonstrate how characters' identities are first fragmented before being reconstituted across temporal space, which ultimately reflects on the condition of humanity throughout history.[14] These encounters support the idea that "coincidence connects seemingly disparate, geographically dispersed characters" while drawing attention to the ways in which these fragmented narratives make up one shared history.[15]

Mitchell's representation of interconnectedness encourages a single story to be viewed as consisting of many varied perceptions, while promoting the idea of lived experience that surpasses spatiotemporal divides. In this way, *Cloud Atlas* "animates an entire circuitry of global interaction and

interdependence."[16] Arguably, this novel represents what Sarah Dillon has argued as being Mitchell's most "persistent and powerful theme—that of interconnection."[17]

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Notes

1. Will McMorran, "*Cloud Atlas* and *If on a Winters' Night a Traveller*: Fragmentation and Integrity in the Postmodern Novel," in *David Mitchell: Critical Essays*, ed. Sarah Dillon (Canterbury: Gylphi, 2011), here 155-175.

2. Patrick O'Donnell, "Time Travels: *Cloud Atlas*" in *A Temporary Future: The Fiction of David Mitchell*, ed. Patrick O'Donnell (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), here 69-102.

3. Dalene Labuschagne, "Storytelling in David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas:* Archiving the Future-to-come," *Scrutiny2: Issues in English Studies in Southern Africa* 24, nos. 2–3 (2019): here 4-25, doi: https://doi.org/10.1080/18125441.2020.1754447.

4. Kevin Brown, "Finding Stories to Tell: Metafiction and Narrative in David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*," *Journal of Language, Literature and Culture* 63, no. 1 (2016), here 77-90, doi: https://doi.org/10.1080/20512856.2016.1152078.

5. Hélène Machinal, "'Cloud Atlas': From Postmodernity to the Posthuman," in *David Mitchell: Critical Essays*, ed. Sarah Dillon (Canterbury: Gylphi, 2011), here 127-154.

6. Peter Childs and James Green, "The Novel in Nine Parts," in *David Mitchell: Critical Essays*, ed. Sarah Dillon (Canterbury: Gylphi, 2011), here 25-47.

7. Sarah Dillon, "Introducing David Mitchell's Universe: A Twenty-First Century House of Fiction," in *David Mitchell: Critical Essays*, ed. Sarah Dillon (Canterbury: Gylphi, 2011), here 4-23.

8. David Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2004), here 409.

9. Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*, 324.

10. Childs and Green, "The Novel in Nine Parts," 27.

11. Childs and Green, "The Novel in Nine Parts," 27.

12. Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*, 64.

13. Courtney Hopf, "Stories We Tell: Discursive Identity Through Narrative Form in 'Cloud Atlas'," in *David Mitchell: Critical Essays*, ed. Sarah Dillon (Canterbury: Gylphi, 2011), here 105-126.

14. Caroline Edwards, "Strange Transactions: Utopia, Transmigration and Time in 'Ghostwritten' and 'Cloud Atlas'," in *David Mitchell: Critical Essays*, ed. Sarah Dillon (Canterbury: Gylphi, 2011), here 177-200.

15. Edwards, "Strange Transactions," 16.

16. Childs and Green, "The Novel in Nine Parts," 27.

17. Dillon, "Introducing David Mitchell's Universe," 13.