

**JUDIT BÁNHÁZI**

**Madmen In and Out of Time  
A McTaggartian Reading of Madness in Fiction**

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## Abstract

The purpose of this article is to familiarize readers with a philosophical essay by J.M.E. McTaggart and then to employ it as a basis of literary analysis. The early-20<sup>th</sup> century arguments on the unreality of time by metaphysician J.M.E. McTaggart's are applied to the temporal experience of madmen in 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> century British and American prose pieces. It is the intention of this study to decipher the thoughts of certain characters in works by Bernard Malamud, Virginia Woolf and Edgar Allan Poe, in the hope that we can uncover logic, truth-value, or a channel of communication with them. The purpose is not to prove that they did not suffer from psychological illnesses, rather it is to challenge the idea that the inability to exist in linear, everyday time is a symptom of madness. By familiarizing the reader with McTaggart's assertion that time is unreal, and approximating it to the quantum-physical theories of Stephen Hawking, I attempt to outline how McTaggart's ideas concerning time align with those prevalent today. By analyzing how the characters in certain prose pieces think about time or live in time, I contend that their experiences offer an opportunity for us to learn and understand.

**Key words:** time, unreality of time, madness in fiction, J.M.E. McTaggart

## Introduction

For millennia, the concept of madness has fascinated scholars and authors alike. We cannot help but be intrigued and oftentimes terrified by individuals who “act deviant from the societal canon”, lacking a unified vision on reality different from the way “normal” (neurotypical) minds do. The purpose of this paper is not to attempt to change the physiological and psychological definitions of madness and mental illnesses. It is without question that mental illnesses signal a fragmented state of mind that requires careful assisting, monitoring and examining, whether it is just with talk therapy, a combination of medications, or institutionalization. However, what this article does question, is the refusal to accept the logic of certain mentally ill individuals in certain works of fiction, based on the idea that their thoughts appear incoherent or strange viewed from one specific ontological point of view: namely that linear time exists, and that it is a valid system of inertia around which to arrange the elements of reality.

J.M.E. McTaggart was a British philosopher in the Idealist tradition. According to J. A. Bernstein, McTaggart's 1908 essay “The Unreality of Time”, raised more than a few eyebrows upon its publication, primarily due its central argument: *time is unreal*. Bernstein mentions that McTaggart's idea was not well received at first “not least because it ques-

tioned three thousand years of spatial-temporal metaphysics”.<sup>1</sup> It is interesting to note that McTaggart himself did not view his essay as paradigm-changing, as he himself highlighted at the start of “The Unreality of Time” stating that he was not the only philosopher of his own time (Sic!) to ponder upon the reality of time.<sup>2</sup> Undoubtedly McTaggart was correct, however, what makes his essay particularly intriguing is his reasoning. He notes that: “I believe that time is unreal. But I do so for reasons which are not, I think, employed by any of the philosophers whom I have mentioned.”<sup>3</sup> Of course, from a contemporary standpoint this is likely no longer the case. Edward Freeman argues that McTaggart’s arguments may sound somewhat obsolete to the modern reader,<sup>4</sup> however, I am still particularly drawn to using them to analyze the temporal experience of “madmen” in fiction. Why McTaggart? Why not Bergson, Husserl, or Heidegger? To me, the answer lies in the organic relationship between the character of the author, his subject matter and style with regard to my thesis. He was undoubtedly a significant philosopher and well-known in academic circles, but I feel his work is somewhat overlooked in light of the significance of his oeuvre.

Coming from a fiction writing background, my interest in studying “The Unreality of Time” also stems from a semi-conscious professional interest in the character of J.M.E. McTaggart. On reading “The Unreality of Time”, it appeared to me that he had a very profound, yet often vaguely communicated drive to understand the metaphysics of our existence, but that this profound, quasi-logical drive was somehow fuelled by a deeply emotional, personal human experience that is the peculiarity of non-neurotypical minds. This is not to assert that McTaggart had mental problems, but that his specific approach to the temporal feels particularly pertinent whilst the goal is to present an empathic bridge of understanding between our neurotypical perception of time, and the perception of those we deem non-neurotypical. It has been highlighted that McTaggart displayed ec-

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<sup>1</sup> J.A. Bernstein, “‘No Audible Tick’: Conrad, McTaggart, and the Revolt against Time,” *The Conradian* 37, no. 1 (2012): 32. [www.jstor.org/stable/23264493](http://www.jstor.org/stable/23264493)

<sup>2</sup> “In philosophy, again, time is treated as unreal by Spinoza, by Kant, by Hegel, and by Schopenhauer. In the philosophy of the present day the two most important, movements (excluding those which are as yet merely critical) are those which look to Hegel and to Mr. Bradley. And both of these schools deny the reality of time”. J. M. E. McTaggart, “The Unreality of Time”. *Mind: A Quarterly Review of Psychology and Philosophy* 17, (1908): 456-473. <http://www.ditext.com/mctaggart/time.html>

<sup>3</sup> McTaggart, “The Unreality of Time,” 456-473.

<sup>4</sup> “Nowadays, few philosophers who take up the problem of time endorse this sweeping metaphysical thesis. Most see fluid time as entirely illusory. The rest are split between those who believe to the contrary and those who hold both fluid time and static time to be equally real.” Edward Freeman, “On McTaggart’s Theory of Time,” *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 27, no. 4 (2010): 389. [www.jstor.org/stable/25762149](http://www.jstor.org/stable/25762149)

centric behavior. As noted in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: “He was on most accounts an unusual fellow, with a big head and a crab-like walk (Rochelle 1991, 97). Peter Geach (1971, 10) reports that, ‘To the end of his days he walked down corridors with a curious shuffle, back to the wall, as if expecting a sudden kick from behind.’ (...) McTaggart saluted cats whenever he met them (Dickinson 1931, 68; Rochelle 1991, 97). (...) His preferred method of transportation was a tricycle.”<sup>5</sup> McTaggart believed that mysticism was an essential approach to experience and the transcribing of reality.<sup>6</sup> He frequently described a hypersensitive experience called “the Saul feeling”<sup>7</sup> based on Browning’s poem, *Saul*, which begins: “I know not too well how I found my way home in the dark”. His musings on the nature of existence lead him into a mystical universe—he believed in “the harmony of immortal spirits”<sup>8</sup> and that the fundamental glue that holds the Universe together is Love.<sup>9</sup>

Though he certainly wasn’t the only unusual philosopher in history, applying his ideas to the thoughts of non-neurotypical fictional characters instantly unraveled a particularly interesting, even emotional connection to these characters. I would like to take the reader on a journey through McTaggart, and hopefully, as sentimental as it sounds, convey the same empathic connection to the strange and unusual I have been lucky enough to experience through him.

Time, just like madness, has fascinated the minds of scholars and authors alike, for thousands of years. Even our everyday, individual perception of time is constantly changing, let alone the scientific proposals which familiarize us with its nature. Not even the greatest minds of history can account for certain properties of it (even Stephen Hawking struggled to provide a way to account for the direction of time for example<sup>10</sup>). The purpose of this article is not to state something fundamentally new about the nature of time. However, it is proposed to draw several links between e.g. arguments of McTaggart and the thoughts of Stephen Hawking, in an attempt to explain what, with our present understanding, can be accounted for what McTaggart calls “time” as a whole in his essay.

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<sup>5</sup> “Biographical Sketch of McTaggart” in Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, ed. Edward N. Zalta (1995), <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/mctaggart/>

<sup>6</sup> “Theology never holds itself apart from mysticism for any long period, and almost all mysticism denies the reality of time.” J.M.E. McTaggart, “The Unreality of Time,” 456-473.

<sup>7</sup> G. Lowes Dickinson, *J. McT. E. McTaggart* (Oxford University Press, 1931), 94.

<sup>8</sup> Dickinson, *J. McT. E. McTaggart*, 96.

<sup>9</sup> Dickinson, *J. McT. E. McTaggart*, 96

<sup>10</sup> “To summarize, the laws of science do not distinguish between the forward and backward direction of time.” Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time* (London: Bantam Books, Penguin Random House UK, 2016), 172.

Looking at “The Unreality of Time” through the lens of Hawking, as opposed to other 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophers who also dealt with the non-linearity of time, lends itself to my thesis. As this will be elaborated on later, my understanding is that what McTaggart calls “time” is in essence what we might associate with our linear, everyday perception of time, which according to Hawking’s scientific proposal, is the so-called “*psychological arrow of time*”. It should come as no surprise that literary characters coping with some sort of psychological deficit, find it challenging to arrange their existence around some mysterious entity labelled as the “*psychological arrow of time*”, the concept, perceptions and rules of time that sane, neurotypical minds prescribe to.

After an introduction to McTaggart’s essay, and his arguments, I will conduct an analysis of three characters from three pieces of prose: Isaac from Bernard Malamud’s short story “Idiots First”, Septimus Warren Smith from Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* and Roderick Usher from Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher”. The method will involve exploring, through a McTaggartian lens, their inner mental logic and/or the non-typical behavior they display in their respective texts; that is, the behavior and thought that result in them being perceived as “mad” in their environments. I will attempt to show how, with a McTaggartian reading (i.e. our linear perception of time is not necessarily true to reality, a.k.a. the psychological arrow of time is something which is only fully adaptable by neurotypical minds), their thoughts and actions can be decoded in a different way. This is not an attempt to reject medicine or psychology and conclude that these three characters are indeed “normal” —, the objective is to present a bridge of understanding, an unbiased, non-judgemental method through which to connect with these characters in a more profound manner. Such a reading can also assist in us connecting with the respective authors, also: it should be noted that two out of the three authors (Woolf and Poe) coped with similar conditions to their fictive characters. Not only this, but McTaggart himself was somewhat non-neurotypical, thus, this paper might also somehow help to unpick the relationship of the authors to their texts.

## I. The Unreality of Time... and what remains of it now

As per the Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, McTaggart was “one of the most important systematic metaphysicians of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. His greatest work is *The Nature of Existence* (...). In addition, he authored many important articles on metaphysics, including his famous *The Unreality of Time* in 1908 (...).”<sup>11</sup> McTaggart was “also a dedicated interpreter and champion of Hegel, (...)” and his most important recurring conclusions

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<sup>11</sup> Zalta, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://plato.stanford.edu/>

in relation to the Hegelian dialectic and cosmology were “that time is unreal, that existence exhausts reality, that modal notions cannot be applied to reality as a whole, and that absolute reality contains imperfections”.<sup>12</sup>

One of the most important and axiomatic notions that needs to be re-iterated before engaging with McTaggart’s essay is that even though he argues for the non-existence of *time*, he argues so at a point in history when the notions and approaches towards the temporal were based on a certain set of philosophical, empirical and scientific ideas. Therefore, even though McTaggart denounces the existence of time, he does so on the basis of what that term meant during or before that period: the pre-Einsteinian absolute time. His observations are, if not exclusively, primarily on a linear, horizontal scope of events. More precisely, time, which is technically based on and measured by an exterior system that reduces it to units that can be directly positioned onto a horizontal line of events. This line is based on either the moments’ position in history, that is past, present, or future (this notion he calls the “*A Series*”) or the more abstract temporally fixed quality of each moment in correlation with each other as to being either earlier or later than one another (this he calls the “*B Series*”) or a notion on the position of events having a fixed atemporal order of M, N, O P – a sequential order only, and not a direction (“*C Series*”).<sup>13</sup> As will be clarified later, there are several internal paradoxes between these three “Series”. These paradoxes are a vital element of McTaggart’s final conclusion, and have been also generating long-standing debates between those generally inclined to accept the *A Series* to be true and those who do so with the *B Series*. The so-called *B-Theorists* are accepting of the theory of relativity based on the *B Series*, ergo it can be argued that traces of Einsteinian time are already evident in McTaggart’s ideas.

The *A Series* describes events happening in a moment that is past, present, or future. Clearly, these are not fixed positions. An event, which is occurring at one moment was once the future and will be the past later. As opposed to this, the *B Series* is a fixed, permanent notion. An event, which precedes another, will always have this fixed position of being earlier as opposed to being later than another, a moment which occurs after it. We were always born after our mothers, and they after theirs. According to McTaggart, events

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<sup>12</sup> Zalta, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://plato.stanford.edu/>

<sup>13</sup> “The paradox that he introduced has become seminal in contemporary philosophy, engendering what are essentially two warring camps of theorists: the “presentists” and the “eternalists;” or, those who see time as occurring only in the present (the A-Series), and those who see it as occurring at all points but dependent upon the frame of reference (the B-Series). To some extent, this debate predates McTaggart, owing much to the arguments between Leibniz and Newton over what time is, and, specifically, whether it is “real” or not— meaning whether it can be said to exist independent of human conception, a question that dates back to antiquity.” Bernstein, “No Audible Tick,” 33.

are the “contents of a position in time” and moments a “position in time”.<sup>14</sup> McTaggart argues that since the *B Series* is a permanent notion, it should be more accurate than the relative *A Series* when it comes to describing time. However, the *A Series* appears to capture the essence of time, but it is contradictory, and less accurate than the *B Series*, therefore, existence is most likely not temporal. McTaggart begins to argue for the non-existence of time since the notion, which would describe it in a more perceptually accurate way is contradictory and less accurate than a permanent, therefore objective notion. An interesting side-note from Richard M. Gale should be inserted here, an assertion that I am inclined to agree with. Gale, in contrast to the popular conviction that McTaggart’s article is essentially metaphysical in outlook (Freeman<sup>15</sup>, Bernstein<sup>16</sup>) proposes a different route to deciphering his thoughts, claiming that in fact, McTaggart’s essay takes a phenomenological approach, “being based on the way in which temporal positions appear to us, but everything he says could be recast, and for purposes of clarity needs to be recast, in a linguistic idiom which describes the different ways in which we *talk* about temporal positions.”<sup>17</sup> He illustrates his point by rephrasing an argument of McTaggart’s, underlining that McTaggart’s issue with the reality of time stems from intuitively tapping into a discrepancy between *how we talk about time* and time itself.<sup>18</sup>

I would argue that citing a phenomenological approach is vital at this point, in order to ease the reader into applying a specific lens of focus whilst studying McTaggart. One that will draw us closer to the most important point yet to be made: namely, that all his ideas are based on (or rather, attempt to answer) the question as to *whether the concept of linear time actually has a valid system of reference in reality or not*. This will also bring us closer

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<sup>14</sup> McTaggart, “The Unreality of Time,” 456-473.

<sup>15</sup> “Nowadays, few philosophers who take up the problem of time endorse this sweeping metaphysical thesis.” Freeman, “On McTaggart’s Theory of Time,” 389.

<sup>16</sup> “McTaggart’s question – how we perceive time – is essentially metaphysical; (...)” Bernstein, “No Audible Tick,” 34.

<sup>17</sup> Richard M. Gale, “McTaggart’s Analysis of Time,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 3, no. 2 (1966): 146. [www.jstor.org/stable/20009201](http://www.jstor.org/stable/20009201)

<sup>18</sup> “He begins by saying: ‘Positions in time, as time appears to us *prima facie*, are distinguished in two ways. Each position is Earlier than some and Later than some of the other positions. ... In the second place, each position is either Past, Present, or Future. The distinctions of the former class are permanent, while those of the latter are not.’ This can be rephrased linguistically as: There are two fundamentally different ways in which we make temporal determinations. First, we can say that one event is earlier (later) than some other event; and, second, we can say that some event is now past (present, future). The sentences employed in making claims of the first sort make statements having the same truth-value every time they are uttered, while the sentences employed in the second sort of temporal determination may make statements having different truth-values if uttered at different times.” Gale, “McTaggart’s Analysis of Time,” 146.

to the conclusion of how to relate McTaggart's terminology of "time" to the current scientific approach.

As already mentioned, McTaggart describes time with a relative and a fixed notion. He claims that the fixed notion, technically, should be more accurate in grasping the nature of time – and the pre-requisites it has to apply upon itself to have a valid system of reference in reality, however, that is not the case. Inaccuracy is not the only issue he raises with the *A Series*. He elaborates on his proposal by asking the question whether time *actually forms* an *A Series* as well as a *B Series*, or whether the distinctions of past, present, future, however vital and crucial they seem, are merely tricks of the mind. Of course, time is experienced as a mixture of both, but maybe our *perception* is not valid: "It may be the case that the distinction introduced among positions in time by the *A series* – the distinction of past, present and future – is simply a constant illusion of our minds, and that the real nature of time only contains the distinction of the *B series* – the distinction of earlier and later. In that case we could not *perceive* time as it really is, but we might be able to *think* of it as it really is."<sup>19</sup>

Realizing the discrepancy between how we are able to perceive time versus how we are able to think about it is a very important point. This is where it becomes clear that McTaggart makes a distinction between time as an exterior, objective concept (our perception, which is false), and the interior realisation of this discrepancy. The supposition that time is something we *perceive* within an objective framework entails the notion that it is completely internal, that everything is essentially created by our minds. Sane minds create notions, consciously (we create names for months, years, days, we divide time into units) or unconsciously (perceiving the temporal as events in the past, present or future). Yet these notions are fragile and can be altered when one's state of mind changes. Even McTaggart argues that one of the abilities, which makes us exist in time, is the ability to remember things: with this, he fundamentally reflects on the fact that sane, non-traumatized, conscious minds are more able to fully experience time as this objective, external notion. It is reasonable to derive the conclusion that in this case, biased minds (mentally ill, dying, dreaming, hypersensitive) are unable to exist in time, as far as time is this external, perception-based, and insufficient set of rules.

This is the point at which in my opinion, Stephen Hawking's work can expand on what McTaggart calls "time": Hawking's so-called "psychological arrow of time". I would argue that McTaggart's concept of time connects somewhat with Hawking's concept. Hawking argues that time (linear time) has an "arrow", emphasizing its direction, moving as it does from the past to the future, from birth to death. The reason why time's

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<sup>19</sup> McTaggart, "The Unreality of Time," 456-473.

arrow points in the direction it does is potentially due to three factors, or three supposed types of arrow: the psychological arrow (the direction in which we actually perceive it to pass: we remember the past and anticipate the future, but not the other way round), the thermodynamical arrow (the direction in which entropy or disorder increases) and the cosmological arrow (the direction of time in which the universe is expanding and not contracting).<sup>20</sup>

Without engaging too deeply with quantum-physics, it is sufficient to argue that Hawking's idea appears to account for McTaggart's concept of time; that is, a mere perception. A complex perceptive entity whose system of reference in reality is constructed and maintained by our minds, based on factors existing independently from us (the thermodynamical and cosmological arrow), but reduced into a system of internal and external (everyday) inertia, which is able to cope with it and give it a shape and a form according to our mental capabilities. But is it actually a reflection of "reality"? That, of course depends on what we call "real", but according to Hawking, that is not even the point: he claims that every theory necessarily only exists within our minds, so as opposed to asking what is real and what is not, it is better to ask which is a more useful description.<sup>21</sup>

At some point Hawking began to talk of a concept called "imaginary time", which he used to account for certain quantum-physical explanations to the nature of our universe (essentially, a universe which is like a perpetuum mobile forever existing without a beginning or end, as opposed to one that was "born" and will "die").<sup>22</sup> His arguments for the necessity of such a concept (imaginary time) essentially validate McTaggart's claims, or at the very least give a nod of approval to his musings on the absolute/sole "true to reality value" of "real time".

Through Hawking's lens it can be concluded that McTaggart's "time" is in essence *a canonised set of rules derived from an internal, psychological perception of time by sane, neuro-typical minds*. Can we fault non-neurotypical minds, unable to align themselves perfectly within this externally canonized epistemological lie, even if our lives are ordered around these

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<sup>20</sup> See Hawking, *A Brief History of Time*, 164.

<sup>21</sup> "But (...) scientific theory is just a mathematical model we make to describe our observations: it exists only in our minds. So it is meaningless to ask: which is real, 'real' or 'imaginary' time? It is simply a matter of which is the more useful description." Hawking, *A Brief History of Time*, 159.

<sup>22</sup> "This might suggest that the so-called imaginary time is really the real time, and that what we call time is just a fragment of our imaginations. In real time, the universe has a beginning and an end at singularities that form a boundary to space-time and at which the laws of science break down. But in imaginary time, there are no singularities or boundaries. So maybe what we call imaginary time is really more basic, and what we call real is just an idea that we invent to keep us describe what we think the universe is like." Hawking, *A Brief History of Time*, 158-159.

external rules and prerequisites (like how we measure time in hours, or assign ourselves a birthdate)?

There is another part of McTaggart's essay which still needs to be expounded upon: the so-called *C Series*. After failing to demonstrate the reality of time with the *A* and *B Series*, whilst embarking on a quest to discover a different equation that can explain time, McTaggart introduces the *C Series*, an atemporal fixed order of plain, timeless events having a permanent order of M, N, O, P in relation to each other. They form a *B Series* (temporal relations existing earlier or later) with the help of *change*. This does not mean, however, that he has established the existence of time as there is a discrepancy in that *change* would come from a presumed *A Series* which he has already argued to be a plain *perceptive illusion*. The meaning of the concepts of past, present and future can be illustrated through examples, but this does not define what is meant by them, what they really *are*.<sup>23</sup> It is but an abstraction. Examining McTaggart's essay as a whole, returns us to the notion that *what he calls time* is a construction of the mind, because no equation can properly describe it without *mentally/ internally/ subjectively* assuming its existence.

It is important here to take a moment to note that the unreality of time to various degrees is one of the greatest axiomatic notions of 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophy. However, McTaggart's reasoning has many unique focal points, including when, at the very end of his essay, he makes a small, almost insignificant-seeming remark about the fact that even though he has refuted time, the temporal, the *A* and *B Series*, etc., he cannot do so just yet with the *C Series*. As discussed above, the *C Series* is in essence an atemporal position of *things yet to become what he calls events since they don't have a temporal quality* which are in a fixed order of M, N, O, P. When he described this Series, he used the example of numbers, and how 17, 18, 19 and 20 are always in that given order. It could be experienced in a reverse direction, as 20, 19, 18, 17 and still make sense, but it contradicts with our basic perception of the direction of change (unless it is for some dramatic/momentary function like a countdown). But it is not possible to have an order of e.g. 17, 19, 21, 18. At the very end of his essay, McTaggart states:

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<sup>23</sup> Rightfully so because even Hawking argues that as far as science is concerned, there is essentially no difference between past and future: "Where does this difference between the past and the future come from? Why do we remember the past but not the future? The laws of science do not distinguish between the past and the future. More precisely, as explained earlier, the laws of science are unchanged under the combination of operation (or symmetries) known as C, P and T." Hawking, *A Brief History of Time*, 164.

But the question whether such an objective C series does exist, must remain for future discussions. And many other questions press upon us which inevitably arise if the reality of time is denied. If there is such a C series, are positions in it simply ultimate facts, or are they determined by the varying amounts, in the objects which hold those positions, of some quality which is common to all of them? And, if so, what is that quality, and is it a greater amount of it which determines things to appear as later, and a lesser amount which determines them to appear as earlier, or is the reverse true? On the solution of these questions it may be that our hopes and tears for the universe depend for their confirmation or rejection.<sup>24</sup>

How can we interpret these mysterious elements, which have an amount but not a temporality, varying amounts in the objects, which hold certain positions, and an objective, undeniable fact value under any circumstance? It might not be completely accurate, but there is a possibility to interpret them simply as *numbers*. With this brief remark, McTaggart could have been postulating a universe based on numbers as opposed to a temporal quality. This universe is, in fact, a computer program. In 1999, two film directors, the Wachowskis directed a film called *The Matrix*, which confronted viewers with the possibility that life is no more than a computer simulation. How is it that a philosopher in 1908, without any possible understanding or knowledge of the future appearance of computers and computer programs comes to the very same unconscious conclusion? And why, in this particular segment of his essay, pondering upon the puzzling nature of the *C Series*, did he abandon his normal prose style replacing it with a poetic voice? He writes of “hopes and tears for the universe” which is pure poetry – it entails a very primal, a very desperate, fearful and profound understanding of the importance of the subject without being able to express it in a fully rational way. Though it is not the task of this article to explore this issue, it is worth mentioning, correlating as it does with the idea that he had a certain kind of semi-conscious sensitivity about the understanding of greater powers at work, as did the sensitive narrators/protagonists explored below.

## II. Madness and what is meant by it

Madness is a somewhat derogatory term which describes minds who process reality in an abnormal fashion, and this neuro-fault can result in the afflicted harming of others or themselves. More acceptable terminology for describing such a condition includes: a changed mental condition, a psychological condition or a mental illness; however, for the purposes of this essay “madness” is understood as a poetic term which is describing a

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<sup>24</sup> McTaggart, “The Unreality of Time”, 456-473.

set of fictional characters, whose internal logic rearranges the elements of the external universe in an order unrecognizable to the majority. It is not a condition based on an altered physiological state (dreaming, stupor), but a lifelong (Isaac in “Idiots First”) or an acquired (Septimus Warren Smith in *Mrs. Dalloway*, Roderick Usher in “The Fall of the House of Usher”) condition of the conscious mind which fundamentally shifts the individual’s perceptive conclusions into an internalised, rearranged set of “parallel universes”. It is a parallel universe because the rules and logic, which define their existence, are vastly different than those of the sane mind. They live within this rearranged interior universe, with little regard to the exterior. That is why it is so hard to understand them and why some claim that their reflections and thoughts are chaotic and lack consistency. However, by viewing their thoughts, musings and words through a different lens, an intriguing and special logic can be seen to be at work. This alternative reading of their interior logic is possible by analyzing it through McTaggart’s notions on time.

The Hungarian term for a senseless person is “idétlen” which stems from the word “időtlen”, meaning timeless, unable to exist in time: derived from the original root of the word “idő”, “idé”, it means “before time”, “prematurely born baby”. These prematurely born babies were usually mentally challenged, hence the original connotation of the word.<sup>25</sup> But the underlying, fundamental argument about these entities is their timelessness, as for example in Hungarian Folklore this term is employed to describe souls of dead babies who die prematurely, with their spirit returning to haunt the living<sup>26</sup>—they become timeless creatures, stuck souls, not functioning under the rules of the sane minds’ exterior reality. It is fascinating how even such a simple construction of language associates being mentally challenged with a fault, a malfunction existing in time. In the second part of this study, we turn to the minds of the madmen, and examine how their minds rearrange the linear sets of rules McTaggart uses to describe time, and to what extent their universes are temporal at all.

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<sup>25</sup> “*Idétlen*. Az idő régebbi idé- tövének fosztóképzős származéka, s eredetileg idő előttit, koraszülöttet jelentett. Az ilyenek, főleg régebben, többnyire elmaradtak a szellemi fejlődésben, innen a szó ma eleven jelentése.” *Magyar Etimológiai Kéziszótár*. Arcanum Digitális Tudománytár. <https://www.arcanum.hu/hu/online-kiadvanyok/Lexikonok-magyar-etimologiai-szotar-F14D3/>

<sup>26</sup> Beke Ödön, “*Idétlen*” in “Magyarázatok”. *Magyar Nyelvőr*, *A Magyar Nyelvtudományi Társaság Folyóirata* 76, no. 1 (1952): 56.

### III. Madness in fiction

Before analyzing the literary texts, it is important to expand on the reasons for studying the temporal experience of mentally ill individuals in fiction.

First, there is the case of temporal experience *in fiction*. What temporal experience can be talked about given the fact that the construction of the fictional text itself is already a structural alternation of reality, and the novel or short story itself always entails a “fictive experience of time”?<sup>27</sup> As Paul Ricoeur remarks in his 2<sup>nd</sup> volume of *Time and Narrative*, “the experience of time at issue here is a fictive experience that has an imaginary world for its horizon, one that remains the world of the text”.<sup>28</sup>

While not wishing to disagree with Ricoeur, I argue that fictional prose is a possible genre to consider in attempting to understand character-driven temporal experience that can have a system of reference in and of extratextual reality, and stretches beyond the fictive experience of time. This analysis attempts to examine how time, as an exterior concept, is challenged by characters who themselves experience a rift between “reality” and “fantasy” (or more like delusion). These characters do so by essentially living in a *linear reality* of the prose, which is similar to temporal reality or at least functions within a system of logic which is familiar to us (a.k.a. a prosaic storyline which passes from A to B) yet the characters are able to drift away from time, which passes in a linear way. Prose is significant in so far as it allows for a description of reality as a human experience, even if it entails structural alternations due to the medium of fiction itself. The three texts selected are “tales about time”.<sup>29</sup> And while not wishing to disagree with Ricoeur’s assertion that the temporal experience in fiction is a “fictive experience”, I will attempt to outline how these fictive experiences themselves are ordered and constructed by a character-driven, internal feeling of discrepancy between internal subjective and external “real time”, the same epistemological clash that so puzzled McTaggart. Furthermore, in the case of *Mrs. Dalloway* for example, it is argued that the temporal experience portrayed within this work, however constructed and fictional, reflects the reality of human, conscious temporal experience. I propose that it is not merely a work of art but also a work of subtle, sensitive, quasi-scientific grasping, or, to put it another way, the documentation of a truly metaphysical experience.

But the question remains, in what sense can fiction be an apt territory to draw real-life conclusions, and in what sense can these *characters* have temporal experiences, which can

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<sup>27</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 2, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1985), 100.

<sup>28</sup> Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 2, 100.

<sup>29</sup> Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 2, 101.

be directly related back to the “reality” of time and temporal reality? It is necessary to note that fiction is not the opposite of reality, their relationship is complex and intertwined. It is argued here that these characters are psychologically accurate, hence I also believe that the approach taken echoes what Ruth Ronen calls an “integrationist” approach to fiction.<sup>30</sup> It is noteworthy that two out of the three authors of the texts under consideration had eerily similar personal psychological experiences to their characters’. Being partly a fiction writer myself, I believe that *Mrs. Dalloway* and *The Fall of the House of Usher* are works of personal exorcism, that the temporal experiences Woolf and Poe described through their characters reflected their own personal temporal experiences - or at least, were inspired and influenced by them. In the case of Bernard Malamud, the portrayal of Isaac, however poetic and fictional, can be viewed as a presentation of a very particular case of severe autism. Hence the characterization, again, fictional in terms of concrete characters, reaches beyond fiction in terms of psychological reference – it is these psychological accuracies, and the temporal experience outlived *through* them that are the focus here.

#### IV. /1. Isaac from the postmodern (premature) Matrix

American author Bernard Malamud’s short story, “Idiots First”, first published in 1963, recounts the tale of a dying father in New York called Mendel struggling to get his mentally challenged son Isaac onto a train to his uncle. Mendel is short of time, as he got a notion (from a mysterious entity called “Ginzburg”) that he will die within a day. “The time of the things narrated”<sup>31</sup> is roughly one day (Unlike Virginia Woolf, who fills almost two hundred pages describing just one day, Malamud’s story is rather short, twelve pages in the edition I read). The fictive temporal experience of Mendel is vastly different from the fictive temporal experience of Isaac and for now, I will solely focus on Isaac’s, with reference to McTaggart’s observations rooted in real temporal experience.

What is striking whilst reading the story is the conflict between Mendel’s extreme sense of pressure due to the passing of time, and Isaac’s total ignorance of it. Throughout the entire story, the dying Mendel races against time to settle affairs around Isaac and get him to safety before dying. Yet Isaac has absolutely no idea what is at stake. He has no grasp on the temporal, or what the temporal pressure might entail. It is possible to state, that Isaac has no reflective, perceptive relation to the temporal universe. Neither the

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<sup>30</sup> “Integrationalist approaches repress the ontological differentiation between worlds and posit an unproblematic accessibility between world-systems.” Ruth Ronen, *Possible worlds in literary theory*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 11.

<sup>31</sup> Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 2, 100.

physical elements of it (clocks), nor the constraints imposed by these elements (passing of hours), nor the threat proposed by a finite, temporal existence. It is fair to claim that within the scope of McTaggart's arguments, Isaac does not exist in a temporal universe, as he has no grasp or understanding of the notions that are used to describe existence in time: the *A Series* which would require him to have a sense of past, present and future, and the *B Series*, which would require him to have a temporal understanding of a fixed order of events. But then, in what universe does he exist? Is there a logical/traceable parallel reality, which governs his every step or should we assume he lives in an inner state of chaos? With reference to McTaggart, we can prove the first assumption to be true. For there is a concept to which he has a traceable relation. The *C Series*, which is the assumption that all units of existence have a fixed, atemporal orderly position of M, N, O, P. McTaggart illustrates this series with numbers, claiming that 17, 18, 19, 20 have a fixed ultimate position of following or preceding each other. What is striking about Isaac is that he seldom speaks or reacts to his fathers' words with gestures or sentences that would assume his understanding of them. Most of what he says consists of numbers. Isaac *counts*: "Isaac' he ultimately sighed. In the kitchen, Isaac, his astonished mouth open, held six peanuts in his palm. He placed each on the table. 'One...two...nine'"<sup>32</sup> His irrational counting is a beautiful parallel to the causal reality of the passing time, which pressures his dying father into action... the ticking of a clock that we can hear in our heads whilst reading the story... One, two, three.

Let us presume McTaggart's arguments to be true and accept the fact that the temporal universe is a perceptive illusion, whereas a universe based on the *C Series* might be closer to reality. What we witness here is an entity who lives precisely within this assumed universe. Isaac, whom we have already shown doesn't live in the temporal universe appears to have his existence ruled and rationalized by the universe of *C Series*, a numeric universe. In the terminology of the *Matrix* he is a premature Neo. He sees beyond the rules of the exterior universe and follows another.

He counts in the wrong order which can be explained in one of two ways: one is that he is an "Idiot Neo", i.e. even though he is experiencing and perceiving the universe as numeric and not temporal, he still functions as an "idiot" within it, because he is unable to maintain the order of units fixed. However, there is another explanation: He is *not* counting. He is communicating. If we assume that Isaac's reality is based on a numeric universe, it is fair to assume that his whole system of communication manifests in the use of numbers. Since the exterior universe presumes reality to be based on temporal and spatial notions, and humans have evolved to have certain physical and mental abilities when it

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<sup>32</sup> Bernard Malamud, *Idiots First*, (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1963).

comes to expressing themselves, expressing yourself in a temporal universe whilst you live in a numeric one is not simple. There has to be a communicative discrepancy between a person communicating with a conscious temporal mind (especially if the temporal forces him to experience intense pressure) and a person with a conscious numeric mind.

There is the potential to uncover some real sense in what Isaac says – furthermore, maybe in his own special way, he very consciously resonates with his father’s quest and indeed, tries to react to him. But he does so with a special pattern of numbers - how else would he communicate from a numeric universe; therefore, his attempts remain unresolvable and undecodable. However, not all is in vain, if there is one thing clear from this story, it is that regardless of their troubles communicating, there is a luminous thread of unconditional love between these two people, which is felt throughout the story. The kind of love McTaggart described as his most cherished experience, as the fundamental organizing element of the universe: “I had a curious sense of being literally in love with the world. There is no other way in which I can express what I then felt. I felt as if I could hardly contain myself for the love which was bursting within me. It seemed as if the world itself was nothing but love. (...) At the back and foundation of things I was certain was love – and not merely placid benevolence but active, fervent, devoted love and nothing less.”<sup>33</sup> This is the love, which saves Isaac: the love, which is eternal within him, because he is living outside of that temporal universe which can put an end to everything, including Mendel’s life. Ginzburg might have taken Mendel, but in the end, I would like to believe that he still somehow escaped the grasp of mortality by loving his son unconditionally.

#### IV. /2. The mental time travels of Septimus Warren Smith

Septimus Warren Smith, a character in British author Virginia Woolf’s novel, *Mrs. Dalloway* first published in 1925, is a World War I veteran, coping with what in our present understanding is a clear case of post-traumatic stress syndrome. However, a careful reading of his issues might suggest (with a modern reader’s mind) that there are symptoms in his condition which could be diagnosed as either a surfacing case of dissociative disorder/schizophrenia, or as Seyedeh Sara Ahou Ghalandari and Leila Baradaran Jamili claim in their essay “Mental Illness and Manic-Depressive Illness in Virginia Woolf’s Mrs. Dalloway”<sup>34</sup>, an apparent case of bipolar disorder and manic depression. Ahou Ghalandari and

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<sup>33</sup> G. Lowes Dickinson quotes from J.M.E. McTaggart, *Nature of Existence*, in: *J. McT. E. McTaggart*, 168.

<sup>34</sup> Seyedeh Sara Ahou Ghalandari and Leila Baradaran Jamili, “Mental Illness and Manic-Depressive Illness in Virginia Woolf’s Mrs. Dalloway,” *Journal of Novel Applied Sciences* 3, no. 5 (2014): 482-489. <http://jnasci.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/482-489.pdf>

Baradaran Jamili assert that in “Mrs. Dalloway”, Virginia Woolf separates her own mental condition in what they call a “bipolar experience”. She does so by dividing herself into two parts, one which struggles with the reality of her illness, a “psychotic” person (Septimus) and the other a “euthymic”<sup>35</sup> person, Clarissa Dalloway – a hypersensitive creature able to maintain a healthy and ongoing relationship with the reality around her whilst struggling with the intensity of an experience that is a deeper, more sensitive understanding of it.

As argued above the “fictional experience” detailed in this novel strikes me as an accurate portrayal of the entity of time as experienced by conscious human beings, and I find Septimus’ “fictive temporal experience” more intriguing from the point-of-view concerned with the psychological accuracy of the character, than the metaphorical relation it has to what Ricoeur calls “monumental time” (historical time which entails chronological time - the symbol of authority figures in the novel). As Ricoeur remarks, “the art of fiction here consists in weaving together the world of action and that of introspection, of mixing together the sense of everydayness and that of the inner self.”<sup>36</sup> Or as one could say, *life*. The temporal life of conscious, human beings. And Septimus is a real, breathing figure within it. Virginia Woolf’s time is anything but strictly linear, anything but absolute. It is full of hoops, loops, ellipses and “internal time travel”. All the while with so much sensitive truthfulness, capturing the true nature of each moment, that present, which is in contradiction to McTaggart’s *A Series*, to McTaggart’s “time”. Woolf and Septimus demonstrate how the clash, felt and implied by McTaggart on what sane minds tell us everyday time is, as opposed to the internal realization of its discrepancies, leads us to the inevitable result incorporated in living within the canon of the idea of everyday time – death, an end. For where there is time, there has to be death.<sup>37</sup>

If Isaac is completely outside of the temporal universe, what we witness in the case of Septimus is a dire battle between trying to grasp it and completely shifting out of it. Whereas in the case of Clarissa Dalloway, due to her hypersensitive quality, she becomes a breathing portal that is able to fluctuate between layers of a multidimensional reality in which the temporal becomes a reinvented concept, Septimus experiences a rift, a quite lethal rift between the objective exterior temporal reality and his interior experience. The unreality of time (McTaggart’s “time”, which is also Ricoeur’s “monumental time”, of

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<sup>35</sup> Ahou Ghalandari and Baradaran Jamili, “Mental Illness and Manic-Depressive Illness,” 486. Originally quoted from: Thomas C. Caramagno, *The Flight of the Mind: Virginia Woolf’s Art and Manic-Depressive Illness*. (University of California Press, 1992): 33.

<sup>36</sup> Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 2, 104.

<sup>37</sup> Or as Ricoeur puts it: “the experience of the mortal discordance between personal time and monumental time, of which Septimus is both the hero and the victim.” Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 2, 108.

which chronological time is but the audible expression"<sup>38</sup>) transforms Clarissa – and kills Septimus.

Septimus undoubtedly experiences being removed from reality in many ways, not just temporal. He himself claims that he is struggling with a certain sense of apathy, his wife, Rezia desperately reminisces about how far Septimus has shifted from her and himself, how he mostly resembles a vegetable when he is mumbling to himself without any connection or intention to communicate or react to the world or her. This perceived apathy, a sense of unresponsiveness, abstaining from the ability of ordinary human communication recalls Isaac. It can be assumed that there is a pattern here: non-neuro-typical characters, who are struggling with external temporal notions and internal parallel universes, have a troubling epistemological alienation from their surroundings.

What Septimus also experiences is constant alienation from ordinary *sensory* experiences: he can no longer taste food, he can no longer hear (he can hear birds singing in Greek), or see as others do (he hallucinates his dead comrade to be with him), clearly, in all aspects, he is shifting out of the sensory prime universe of humans. Since the concept of time is one of these sensory deceptions, at least according to McTaggart, it is no wonder he dissociates from it as well. But how heart-wrenching, and at the same time, how understandable is Rezia's (not negatively, but objectively) selfish fear of this sensory alienation, this apathetic state in which she lost her loving husband and the happy marriage she hoped to have on leaving Italy and moving to England. How desperate is the struggle to witness a mind falling apart, and not being able to connect with it.

It is pertinent here to analyze the most prominent visual hallucination of Septimus in detail: the ubiquitous presence of Evans. The visualization of Evans is a clear case of his subconscious mind succumbing to an internalised, self-poisoning pathological sense of guilt as well as the inability to cope with the trauma of witnessing the senseless death of his friend. However, in theory we could argue that ghosts are timeless creatures, apparitions from a non-linear, non-temporal universe. In this way, the hallucination of the ghost also serves our purposes in illustrating how rifts between exterior temporal and interior atemporal universes collide in Septimus's mind. Our reality, Mrs. Dalloway's reality is temporal, and Septimus is desperately shifting away from it, to a territory unknown.

Septimus also illustrates a shift from exterior temporality by displaying an ever-growing inability to internalise the perceptive presumptions of the *A Series* and *B Series*, namely a clear sense of past, present and future, and the temporal order of events. Note this passage where Septimus hallucinates dogs becoming men, the logic of which we will not

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<sup>38</sup> Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 2, 106.

examine further, because the gist of his musing is not *what turns into what*, but that this is an ability to see into the future:

No crime; love, he repeated, fumbling for his card and pencil, when a Skye terrier snuffed his trousers and he started in an agony of fear. It was turning into a man! He could not watch it happen! It was horrible, terrible to see a dog become a man! At once the dog trotted away. Heaven was divinely merciful, infinitely benignant. It spared him, pardoned his weakness. But what was the scientific explanation (for one must be scientific above all things)? Why could he see through bodies, see into the future, when dogs will become men?<sup>39</sup>

Note how desperately Septimus tries to determine the *scientific* reason behind his hallucination and *ability*. How conscious he is of the fact that the rules of the new universe in which he lives need to be explained and rationalised, or how real these parallel experiences and how they re-arrange elements of reality are to him— so real that he searches for a scientific explanation for it.

Once again, Septimus has not abstained from the concept of time like Mendel's son, he is conscious of exterior time – when Rezia tries to bring him out of a hallucination in which he is talking to himself (he believes he is talking to his dead comrade, Evans), she asks him if he knows *what time it is* (Woolf 84-85). And he does answer, it's quarter to twelve. Once again, here's a complex moment when the interior atemporal reality and the experience of it (Septimus talking with Evans) clash with a voice from the exterior temporal (Rezia asking what time it is). Septimus can switch between the two, he listens to the strike of the clock, can instantly tell what the exterior time is. But inside his head, the past, the present and the future are muddled. He lives with a ghost, and thinks he can foresee the future - the psychological arrow of time is reversed.

Septimus, internally, has clearly lost track of the order in which events supposedly take place in the exterior reality. And via this ever-growing rift between exterior temporal notions and his interior universe, he makes a most baffling assertion, not long before he ends his life: that there is no such thing as death. Rezia, his wife, is irritated by this irrational announcement, but the truth is, for a mind which is (partially) atemporal, or at least, has the ability to experience an atemporal dimension parallel with a temporal one, it is indeed a logical conclusion, since temporality is linked to beginnings and ends, birth, life, and death. For a mind which does not exist within this framework, or is able to see past it, the notion that death does not exist is indeed a fairly logical one. Could it be true? Does the idea that reality is not temporal in nature entail the fact that neither is existence? Or are we living according to the rules of linear time to force the structure of our linear

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<sup>39</sup> Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, 82-83.

physiological decay onto the universe around us? Are we part of infinity, intertwined and connected, or just momentary morsels stuck between the wheels? Septimus clearly had intriguing ideas about it. But of course, since he could only articulate these ideas in a temporal dimension, once again like in case of Isaac, the message is lost in interdimensional translation. But it does not mean that he is senseless or irrational – his thoughts have a logic within their own system of existence.

Septimus's brain is a fascinating road map. Everything is confused, from temporality to spatial constructions and generic mechanics of reality. It's one of the most profound yet relatable journeys into the mind of a madman.

#### IV. /3. The metaphysical downfall of Roderick Usher

One of the last thoughts of Septimus, as we have already seen, was that there is no such thing as death. Indeed it may appear an irrational idea, but not in a non-temporal universe. The question of what does the “end” become without time, or what happens when time ends is something which is of great significance for one of the most famous characters created by Edgar Allan Poe, Roderick Usher of “The Fall of the House of Usher”, our next “Atemporal Madman”. The temporal structure of Poe's short story is complex and intricate: the fictional experience of the temporal is driven by and constructed around one, unified arrow of the temporal angst. This arrow is so strong it feels that this story is not unlike a fictional black hole: the density of the inner gravitational force of temporal angst twists and turns the plot elements and character experiences towards one, homogenic experience of total collapse and fatal cessation (at least from the “outside”).

Everything in Poe's short story crudely points towards the inevitable fact that the Usher House (both as a family line and as a physical home) is nearing its end. This feeling is so powerful and so well-illustrated by the perceptive experience of the narrator that it becomes almost tangible, the feeling of this growing black hole towards which the characters of the story irreversibly gravitate. Not a spatial, but a temporal back hole (sic!). Even the spatial (the house and its' natural surrounding) is simply there to illustrate the effect of temporal horror. “The Fall of the House of Usher” is one of the most primal yet brutally symbolic descriptions of time *nearing its' end* and the dreadful fear of temporal creatures being sucked into this paradox. For how could time end? As per McTaggart it does not - because it does not exist. Yet what we can profoundly feel and witness in this short story about the very last descendant of a family line and the act of this family line becoming extinct, is the epistemological fear of the end of a temporal universe as a whole. The Universe of the Ushers symbolically and quite physically ceases to exist by the end, and Poe describes in a poetic and symbolic way the last intense moments before the

complete metaphorical and physical (nota bene: the house collapses in the end) downfall. One could interpret this story as a poetic and prophetic vision of the Big Crunch, more than a hundred years before Hawking formulated this idea. The end of our existence, our universe – the end of time.

As we are nearing the total end of time, drawing closer and closer to it, the characters in “The Fall of the House of Usher” irreversibly change from temporal to atemporal creatures. Note for example the catalepsy<sup>40</sup> of Madeleine and Roderick, which is a more extreme version of the condition Isaac and Septimus suffered from: a loss of the ability to communicate with, interact and react to the exterior reality of a temporal nature. Essentially, catalepsy gives the afflicted an appearance of being dead whilst still being alive, so much so that cataleptic patients (including Poe) were constantly terrified of being buried alive whilst in a cataleptic trance. I have always found this condition extremely intriguing, especially from vantage point of an essay concerned about characters unable to exist within the framework of a reality which is judged to be temporal in nature. People who fall into catalepsy essentially surrender all sense of motion and change, both so-called pre-requisites of a temporal experience as per McTaggart. Yet they do exist. They are not dead. It is as if they involuntarily “tuned out” of a temporal experience, dictated by the direction of time’s psychological and thermodynamical arrows: the direction in which entropy grows: they sink into a state which creates the least possible chaos. Steady, motionless, stale, at peace. Yet it seriously distorts our natural perception of “being alive”, so much so that cataleptic patients were frequently buried alive in the early 19th century.

Roderick also experiences the extreme opposite of Septimus’s sensory apathy, he develops a form of sensory overload, he is troubled by even the faintest of light, the most innocuous of smells, the blandest of taste. His appearance also changes drastically: “Surely, man had never before so terribly altered, in so brief period, as had Roderick Usher!” (Poe, “The Fall of the House of Usher”, 645). What the narrator describes here is essentially Roderick Usher growing *very old* (at least by appearance) in a *very short* period of time, which is fundamentally a paradox, a fault in the temporal matrix, and a complete overturning of the rules of the temporal experience. In essence, he is half a ghost - with a severe anxiety disorder.

Here an interesting question arises; because if we examine this story from the point of view of the narrator, we can truthfully claim that he is in contact with ghostly figures who are somehow trespassing into the temporal universe in front of his very eyes, and the

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<sup>40</sup> Catalepsy is a curious condition that even Poe himself experienced throughout his life. According to Merriam-Webster it is “a trancelike state marked by loss of voluntary motion in which the limbs remain in whatever position they are placed.” <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/catalepsy>

fact that he is in touch with them and able to see and hear and experience them means he himself is shifting away from the experience of the temporal universe. Such a meta-claim is appropriate here, acknowledging that this story could be read as a symbolic description of the fear of the end of existence (of a temporal universe), therefore, characters and objects at all levels of the story will resonate with and experience the effect of this fear and this fateful possibility of an event.

Madeline, Roderick's sister is in an even further advanced state of transition, and witnessing this process terrifies Roderick yet more. At the moment that Madeline appears to die, all notions of the exterior temporal causality cease to exist, as the universe is sucked into the temporal black hole at such a pace that it is not possible to distinguish between the living and the dead any longer, that Madeline might or might not be alive in the grave, that she might or might not already be a ghost when she comes back for Roderick. In fact, she is in a state of limbo between the temporal and atemporal, and her final transformation scares Roderick to death.

What kills Septimus is the curiosity that killed the cat, almost like an overpowering urge to fully succumb to the atemporal universe in his head, and what kills Usher is the thought of having to do so. On a deeper level, Usher is all of us, dreading as we do the possibility of our linear, causal, external perception of the world being shaken to the core and denied to us – Usher is the epistemological fear of humans of nearing the end as per our perceptive universe, from transforming from a temporal universe.

Indeed, it is a short story with characters and plot, but it could also be interpreted as a sensitive description of our brains, desperately attempting to process reality for what it might be, an atemporal universe where our perceptions are futile and invalid. But because we are unable to rid ourselves of these futile perceptions and see reality for what it is, with such claim in the subconscious picture, our minds immediately perceive this possibility as a threat to our very existence. We cannot process the concept of there being no time because we live in time. Therefore, the nonexistence of time, the reality behind reality, even though it could quite possibly be a means of expanding our consciousness, is interpreted in our minds as *the end time* which is *the end of our life* due to it being a temporal experience for us.

## Conclusion

Handled with a proportionate contemporary gaze, “The Unreality of Time” remains an intriguing text to apply to literary analysis. My goal was to employ J.M.E. McTaggart's particular arguments about the unreality of time to decipher the logic behind the chaotic seeming (fictive) temporal experience of literary characters with psychological problems.

I believe that the analysis is still to be fine-tuned, but it does manage to illustrate the thesis that an empathic bridge of understanding can be built that moves us towards these characters via McTaggart. A thorough analysis of McTaggart's essay was essential before delving deeper into the psyches of Septimus, Isaac and Roderick, since I consider McTaggart, due to his own neurodiverse disposal, as the fourth "character" whom I set out to analyse, with whose thoughts I hoped to create a bridge of understanding. McTaggart's essay is often considered overly poetic, vague and subject to interpretation. With "decoding" his *C Series*, I believe I have managed to capture a different reading, and by viewing it through the lens of Stephen Hawking (whose arguments I found the most pertinent for my thesis) I hope I have managed to present his work constructively. McTaggart, of course, is not a fictional character, unlike Septimus, Roderick and Isaac, hence important (if ever so brief) points needed to be made about the medium-based nature of the temporal experiences of the three fictional characters, and the borders and restrictions of my analysis. However, since two out of the three stories (and "The Unreality of Time") are products of authors who themselves coped with psychological and neurological problems, my main motivation in deciphering the temporal experience of Septimus, Roderick and Isaac was to uncover the true-to-life psychological value behind them, more so than their fictional nature.

I believe that time is one of the grand mysteries left in this world. Many scholars, scientists and artists have looked upon its face over the centuries (or the illusion of centuries...) and attempted to stare into its soul to discover out what it truly is: is it an external set of rules, an internal experience, or a bit of both? Is it a complex factor that is inseparably interlinked with the fabric of our universe, but ceases to exist without the framework of this universe? Is it an omnipotent force, a God of its own? Or is it just a story we tell ourselves to account for our own physical decay in a measurable, seemingly controlled manner? As long as there will be consciously or subconsciously driven thinkers, its' mysteries will continue to be investigated, whether in a poetic or a scientific way. I believe in Hawking's staunch faith that fiction authors and scientists should work hand in hand, together with the ordinary people, and each can (or should) learn from the other. I hope that my thesis has demonstrated that even non-neurotypical, quasi-fictional minds can hold more vital, intriguing and relatable information about the nature of time than what the surface of their seemingly irrational (fictional) experiences suggest.

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