

An Analysis of “The Clock That Went Backward” by Edward Mitchell

Introduction

Edward Page Mitchell’s “The Clock That Went Backward” is a short but remarkable story which only gained popularity well after it had been published. The tale follows two cousins whose mysterious great aunt leaves them an old Dutch clock in her will. During their time at the University of Leiden they meet the peculiar Professor Van Stopp who reveals that the clock can travel back in time, taking the twins with him to 1572 during the siege of Leiden. It is here that the cousins make remarkable discoveries about their great aunt, the professor, and their role in the siege itself. Though short, the story covers a lot of ground and even begins to touch upon some time travel themes that would only become popular well after its publication.

Plot Synopsis

The narrator begins by recounting the genealogy his great-aunt Gertrude has repeatedly told to him and his cousin Harry, both of which are skeptical of its validity. Aunt Gertrude is supposedly the descendent of Holland woman who married a Puritan refugee and lived from 1599-1642. The narrator follows by making the odd comment that, “In our private opinion the great-grandmothers and grandmothers and so forth were pure myths, and Aunt Gertrude herself was the principal in all the adventures attributed to them ...”¹ He also introduces a tall, old Dutch clock she owns that is perpetually stuck at quarter past three. The name of the maker, Jan Lipperdam, is carved into the dial, as well as the date, 1572. Harry and the narrator both have offered to have it fixed, but Aunt Gertrude persists in leaving it the way it is.

One night when they were staying over at her house, they were awoken by the sounds of someone moving around the house. They crept downstairs to find Aunt Gertrude standing on a chair before the clock, winding up its weights. Suddenly the clock begins to function, but the hands appear to be going backwards. What is even more startling is that the two witness Aunt Gertrude to be transfigured by a wild joy that grips her. Just as quickly as it had started, the clock stops and Aunt Gertrude, with a sudden cry of fear, falls to the ground dead. In the subsequent weeks, the narrator takes over almost all of Aunt Gertrude’s possessions while Harry is left only the clock in her will. Additionally, by another stipulation of the will, both of them are enrolled at the University of Leiden, where they end up settling down.

It is here that they meet an eccentric professor Van Stopp, who appears to be the only person there who takes any interest in the town’s history. There had been a battle for the town during the 1570s. King Philip of Spain had attempted to take the territory, but Prince Orange was

¹ Michael Sims, ed., *Frankenstein Dreams: A Connoisseur’s Collection of Victorian Science Fiction* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), 161.

able to fend off his attacks. In discussing this battle, Harry realizes that one of the watchmen awaiting King Philip's attacks had remarkably caught a breach on the opposite side of the town where an attack was not anticipated. Had it not been for this watchman, King Philip would have undoubtedly won the battle. Later on, the narrator remarks that Van Stopp bears an uncanny likeness to that of Aunt Gertrude and Van Stopp, in response to this comment, reveals a painting that depicts a burgher during the battle who looks almost exactly like Van Stopp.

One night when the students had the professor over, Van Stopp remarks that the clock must go backward. This catches both the narrator and Harry by surprise. Van Stopp gets up to the clock and suddenly begins winding it backward, causing him and the two students to get pulled back in time. This goes on for a moment when suddenly a ball of fire shoots through the window and smites the clock, destroying it. They find themselves embroiled in the siege of Leiden. During the battle Harry saves the daughter of the burgomaster, who reveals that her name is Gertruyd van der Wert. It is clear that the two quickly become affectionate for each other. The battle slows and the town waits through the night with the promise that reinforcements will arrive in the morning. At some point a loud boom is heard throughout the town, but no one knows where it came from. Harry rushes forward to the burgomaster and tells him it is on the opposite side of the town. There they find the breach and begin to fend off the attackers. During this struggle one of the burghers fighting near the narrator appears to be Van Stopp. He quickly asks the burgomaster beside him who the burgher is, he responds "That ... is the brother of my wife, the clockmaker Jan Lipperdam." It is here that the narrator loses consciousness, only to wake up in Van Stopp's lecture room with a bandaged arm. The story ends with Van Stopp remarking, "No philosopher, as far as I am aware, has studied the influence of the nineteenth century upon the sixteenth. If cause produces effect, does effect never induce cause?"

Plot Analysis

The short length of the story leaves a lot of questions unanswered and not much to go off of. The first clue we have is the stark connection the author draws between four characters from the tale. It is implied that Professor Van Stopp and Jan Lipperdam are in fact the same person. Our narrator first describes the uncanny likeness between a portrait of a burgher fighting in the siege and Professor Van Stopp early in the story: "'I will show you what is even a more extraordinary coincidence,' said he; and, leading the way across the hall to the great picture of the siege, pointed out the figure of a burgher participating in the defense. It was true. Van Stopp might have been the burgher's son; the burgher might have been Aunt Gertrude's father."² Later on, after having been transported to the past, this connection is emphasized further, the narrator remarking during the battle "Why did the clockmaker, Jan Lipperdam, turn always toward me the face of Professor Van Stopp?"³ Additionally, Aunt Gertrude and Gertruyd are likely the same

² Sims, "Frankenstein Dreams," 165.

³ Sims, "Frankenstein Dreams," 174.

person; besides the blunt similarity in names, the narrators inclination to find a resemblance of Aunt Gertrude in Van Stopp hints at some relation between the two, thus beginning the formation of a family tree which is later reinforced as Jan Lipperdam is revealed to be Gertruyd's uncle. The flaw with this is that they are not related by blood, which is an odd choice by the author and mars the framework constructed here. Nonetheless, the strong hints given by the author would lead the reader to believe that Aunt Gertrude and Gertruyd are the same person as are Jan Lipperdam and Van Stopp.

The next mystery is that if these characters are the same, how did they end up in two different time periods? One plausible chronology is as follows. Jan Lipperdam makes the Dutch clock around 1572. Following the siege of Leiden, the clock is imbued with some otherworldly power, allowing it to travel through time. Aunt Gertrude tells the cousins that "... the works had never performed their functions since a bolt of lightning entered the clock ..."⁴ This could be the source of the clock's power. Jan Lipperdam and Gertruyd end up traveling to the future with the clock but get stranded there. Realizing they are stuck, they settle down into the future, assuming the names Van Stopp and Gertrude. After many years of the clock not working, Gertrude eventually discovers how to get the clock to work again, the narrator detailing "The hands of the clock were moving; they were moving backward. Aunt Gertrude put both arms around the clock and pressed her withered cheek against it ... Then she started back with a sudden cry. The clock had stopped ... She stretched out her arms ... and fell heavily to the floor."⁵ Her death in this scene could be attributed to her old age and the extreme elation she felt at seeing it work again. Gertrude must have planned for her death at some point, arranging for the cousins to go to study at the University of Leiden in her will as well as bestowing the clock to Harry so that it could find its way to Van Stopp. Van Stopp, recognizing the cousins as the descendants of Gertrude, takes them under his wing and gives them a thorough education in the history of the town. Key to this is making sure that Harry realizes the importance of Cow Gate—the location of the crucial breach during the siege—so that when they do travel to the past, he can warn the townspeople about it. Once this is done, Van Stopp visits the cousins and deduces that the clock can go backward, initiating their transit to the past where the remainder of the story takes place.

The thread of events detailed above appears reasonable, but there are a few holes in this theory. The first is how could Van Stopp know that the clock had been fixed and furthermore, that it could go backward in time? Gertrude couldn't have told him as she died in discovering this. It's possible that Van Stopp, once he had made it back to the past, talked to his younger self about what would happen in the future and told himself that the clock would work once the cousins came to see him at the university. This would implement a causal loop in the story where Jan Lipperdam only ever discovers that the clock works from talking to his future self. This is under the assumption that the plot adheres to a one-world cosmology, where history must be consistent and closed. Marie-Laure Ryan, in her "Temporal Paradoxes in Narrative," notes that

⁴ Sims, "Frankenstein Dreams," 162.

⁵ Sims, "Frankenstein Dreams," 163.

invoking a many-worlds cosmology leaves the story open-ended and allows for a multitude of outcomes, but for the sake of simplicity this will be ignored.⁶ Another unanswered question is how does the story end with the narrator back in the lecture hall in the future? The clock had been destroyed, so there were no immediate means of going to the future and our narrator could have only passed out for at most a day before waking up to Van Stopp's lecture. The reader is in part led to believe that it was all a dream, if not for the narrator's injured arm. The last hole in this explanation is that it doesn't tell of what happened to Harry. It is clear that Gertruyd and Harry quickly bond during the cousins' time in the past. Does he stay in the past to live with Gertruyd? And if so, how does he fit into the past beyond the siege? There isn't enough information presented in the story to determine the answers to these questions.

History of "The Clock that Went Backward"

As aforementioned, "The Clock that Went Backward" was written by Edward Mitchell and published anonymously in "The Sun" on 18 September 1881.⁷ Mitchell had worked as an editor for the paper for over fifty years, during which time he wrote a series of works steeped in science fiction, which was a genre largely in its infancy at the time. His pieces were forgotten for a time, but were later rediscovered by Sam Moskowitz, an American writer and historian of science fiction. He collected Edward's writings in a book titled "The Crystal Man" after one of the short stories of the same name written by Edward.⁸ Both stories, "The Crystal Man" and "The Clock That Went Backward" predate similar works by H.G. Wells, being "The Invisible Man" and "The Time Machine." In "The Crystal Man" anthology, Moskowitz calls Mitchell the "lost giant of American science fiction."⁹

With regards to the content of the story, what's striking is that the (first) siege of Leiden actually took place in 1574.¹⁰ Despite taking place in a different year, the events of the story tend to follow historical accounts of the siege. Distinct in these were the inclusion of a storm during the siege and the importance of weather in the city's relief on October 3 of that year. The siege of considerable historical importance, Tiegs states, "The siege and subsequent rescue of the city were pivotal moments in early years of the Dutch Revolt." At times Mitchell wrote stories on social issues or made social commentary through his science fiction works.¹¹ It is not clear if he

⁶ Marie-Laure Ryan, "Temporal Paradoxes in Narrative," *Style* 43, no. 2 (2009): 142–64.

⁷ Everett Franklin Bleiler, *Science-Fiction, the Early Years: A Full Description of More Than 3,000 Science-Fiction Stories from Earliest Times to the Appearance of the Genre Magazines in 1930: With Author, Title, and Motif Indexes* (Kent State University Press, 1990), 509.

⁸ Edward Page Mitchell, *The Crystal Man: Landmark Science Fiction* (Doubleday, 1973).

⁹ Mitchell, "The Crystal Man," IX.

¹⁰ Tiegs, Robert. "Hidden beneath the Waves: Commemorating and Forgetting the Military Inundations during the Siege of Leiden." *Can. J. of Netherlandic Studies/Rev. can. d'études néerlandaises*, 2014.

¹¹ Edward Page Mitchell, *The Tachypomp* (Lulu.com, 2015), 10.

has the same motives in creating this piece, or if it merely fell in with his other speculative writings geared primarily towards entertainment.

Conclusion

“The Clock that Went Backward,” a short but dense recounting of an epic across time, is one of the first instances in which literature has gone as far as to reverse the incessant ticking of the clock to explore some of the intricacies that arise from countering the linear progression adopted by most novels. Edward Mitchell’s ideas were remarkably original in the field of science fiction and if it weren’t for his diminutive popularity during his lifetime, would have made a significant impact on the face of the genre as a whole. Nonetheless, his works have undoubtedly inspired many novels drawing on the same tropes and made many ponder what wondrous things could be made possible through scientific advancement.

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