

IB English Language and Literature

Extended Essay

Category: 2B

Shifts in Temporal Focus in *Arcane*

**“How does *Arcane* use shifts in temporal focus (flashbacks, memory sequences, and temporal pacing) to represent identity formation and trauma across different characters?”**

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## **Introduction**

The Netflix animated series *Arcane: League of Legends* (2021) has been highly rated by many as having a complex plot, and having stylish visuals. Although it is an adaptation of video game *League of Legends*, it is a literary and cinematographic work in itself in that it is multifaceted. The complex gambling aspect of the show around the theme of trauma, identity, and politics is what makes it a successful project. It's time building is one of the basic forms of its narration. The flashbacks, memory sequences, montage and pacing used by *Arcane* to develop characters identities are isometrically connected with their subjective time perceptions.

There is no such thing as a time-neutral narrative fiction. The manner in which events are conveyed either in chronological or even retroactive storytelling or in repetition has a heavy impact on the way the viewer comprehends the information regarding the psychology of the characters and causation of events. Time traveling is not merely a cosmetic element of *Arcane*, but a cost of psychological truth. Intrusive memories may reemerge with trauma. The element of ambition is introduced as a future outlook forecasting. The current obsession with identity is via opposition. The main characteristics conflicts are established on the failure to overcome the various attitude in the characters who portray one of the temporal attitudes.

The protagonists of the show become synonymous with time specific solutions. The three manipulations of time, past, future, and present, all serve to show how *Arcane* uses time as a narrative device and also in a way of using identity as a result of trauma and circumstance. The research question that will inform this essay is thus: How can shifts in the temporal focus (flashbacks, memory sequences, temporal pacing) reveal identity formation and trauma in various characters in *Arcane: League of Legends*?

To answer this question, the essay starts by building a theoretical framework based on the studies by Cathy Caruth about the trauma and the narrative theory presented by Gerard Genette. The three main characters Vi, Jayce, and Ekko are then considered a case

study, reflecting the present-minded resilience, the future-minded progress, and the past-minded trauma. It is based on this that the essay shall contend that trauma breaks the chronological flow of time and distorts the sense of self and the world by the characters, and Arcane constructs identity using the concepts of subjective time.

### **Theoretical Framework: Narrative Theory and Trauma**

A method of examining the manipulation of time in the fiction is the narrative theories of order, duration, and frequency of Gerard Genette (1980). The order is the connection between the events and the order in which they take place. Fiction that exercises an analepsis (flashback) or prolepsis (flash-forward), breaks the chronological order, and memory or anticipation is preferred. Duration is the interrelationship between time of the story and time of the narration, how long events take place in the story and how long the events will be represented on the screen. The relationship between the events and their representation is the narrative device used.

These manipulations of the time in Arcane serve ideological and psychological purposes. Traumatic experiences are depicted in flashbacks, their importance is stressed by the slow pace, and the repetition of the images is the indicate unresolved conflict.

Another development of this analysis is trauma theory. Cathy Caruth (1996) argues that trauma is characterized by lateness and repetition. A traumatic event is not integrated immediately when it happens but at a later stage. It comes involuntarily in flashbacks, dreams and in compulsive repetitions. Trauma disrupts linear temporalities and the past and the present are merged into one psychic experience. The identity is built, therefore, around the unsolvable divide instead of the developmental path.

Judith Herman (1992) develops this conception of trauma by placing it in the context

of interpersonal violence and political oppression. Herman (Trauma and Recovery) asserts that trauma causes three basic fundamental psychological structures to be disrupted, including safety, trust and connection. Trauma causes hyperarousal, intrusion and constriction symptoms, which are symptoms that signify disintegration in the sense of temporal continuity of the individual. Individuals can experience the past as though it was there (intrusion), be emotionally numb (constriction), or always on the alert of danger (hyperarousal). The model of Herman highlights the fact that trauma is a social and political issue as well as a psychological wound within. By doing this, temporality in *Arcane* is not subjective but part of structural violence that exists in the interactions between Piltover and Zaun specifically. The time discontinuity within the story echoes the argument of Herman that trauma disfigures the individual in that the survivor will not be able to experience time in its continuity and coherence.

Alongside the theory of trauma, a theory of psychological temporality of this framework is also supported. Psychological temporality is defined as the subjective form of time in which it is experienced in the mind and not through time. The phenomenology of internal time-consciousness by Edmund Husserl (1991) forms a conceptual framework of explaining this structure. Husserl maintains that human experience of time is made up of three dimensions that are related to each other: retention (the present of the just-past), primal impression (the present moment), and protention (the future of what is going to happen). These dimensions do not exist separately, but exist simultaneously in the consciousness, i.e. the past, present, and future are the coexisting dimensions of the lived experience. Retained memory and anticipation of the future always shape the present.

This phenomenological model can explain the development of identity over a period. Not according to a chronological succession does a subject exist, but according to the manner in which retained memories, and projected futures, organize the present perception and action. Trauma in this context may be seen as a breakage of retention and protention: the past

fills the present, or the future is predetermined.

Paul Ricoeur (1984) develops this observation by connecting temporality to narrative directly. According to Ricoeur, narrative in *Time and Narrative*, narrative is the main way through which human beings organize lived time into significant arrangement. It is only through the narrative emplotment that chronological time (what he terms as cosmic time) becomes intelligible as it patterns the events in the form of causality, memory and expectation. Narrative thus, bridges the world of phenomenological time (lived experience) with the chronology of history (external chronology).

This theoretical approach, when applied to *Arcane*, implies that the series does not only use time shifts as stylistic techniques. Rather, it dramatizes just the framework of human time-consciousness. Flashback objectifies retention; expectant montages are an indication of protention; slow-motion scenes enhance the primitiveness of the sequence of decision-making. The fragmentation of time reflects fractured time-consciousness, and narrative structure tries to arrange these fractured bits into order. Temporality, therefore, is the state of the identity as well as the expression of the trauma and development.

Lastly, the theory of progress mentality becomes one of the theory that the present essay takes in as an addition to the identity formation concept in *Arcane*. As the theory of trauma illustrates how the subject becomes advantageously caught up in time in the repetition, the progress mentality illustrates how the subject tries to escape the past by projecting himself into the viewed future.

The ideological and the psychological stance that is futuristic as redemption can be referred to as progress mentality. It presupposes that the instability, misery, or injustice may be surmounted by innovation, development, or change. This concept has a theoretic background through the division that was made by Reinhart Koselleck between the “space of experience” and the “horizon of expectation” (2004). Koselleck believes that the current

situation of modernity is a growing distance between past experience and future expectation, so that the future is no longer imagined as the repetition of tradition but rather as a space of unprecedented possibility (Koselleck, 2004). Progress is then not a technological achievement but a time ideology: the idea that the time is progressive. In this model, identity is organized not so much through memory as it is through anticipation.

This forward orientation is not however a stable one. According to the idea of liquid modernity that was put forward by Zygmunt Bauman (2000), modern progress does not generate any particular certainty: it creates instability instead. The social forms, institutions and identities are dynamic and are perpetually redefined by economic and technological transformation (Bauman, 2000). The promise of progress thus has a paradoxical nature to it: it promises freedom of the past and at the same time it disintegrates structures on which identity is anchored. It turns future into hope and insecurity.

These theorists put together imply that progress mentality is a temporal strategy: in using it, one aims to overcome the inherited limitation by dissociating the identity with the burden of the past. But this disaffiliation can be self-defensive. According to the trauma-theoretical approach, future projections may be an avoidance tool. The subject will not be trying to integrate traumatic memory (LaCapra's "working through"), but instead tries to run away. The future is an alternative to the unresolved conflict.

Getting out of the past is not thus equated to healing. Trauma and its effect on temporality Temporality is broken by collapsing past and present; uncritical progress ideology breaks it by breaking the links between expectation and experience. They both distort identity but in different ways. One confines the subject to repetition, and the other runs the danger of moral blindness by being overprojected and overaccelerated.

In *Arcane*, this structure explains the ideological and psychological conflicts of characters. Jayce practices progress mentality at its most blatant level: technological futurity

and institutional advancement are his identity formation. Vi, however, is still subject to traumatic repetition not being able to disconnect with the space of experience. Ekko is a kind of an incomplete solution combining memory without being absorbed in paralysis or blind projection.

Placing progress mentality and trauma theory and phenomenological temporality, the exegesis of Arcane is widened, not only in the personal psychology but also in the contemporary ideological organizations. Temporality in the series is not just subjective experience, but a disputed philosophical stance is whether identity is to be based on memory, projected toward transformation, accelerated beyond limitation, or fixed to the present through awareness. The clash of Piltover and Zaun then is not just a conflict of classes and power, but also of worldviews of temporal nature.

## **Background Information**

Arcane: League of Legends Netflix debuted in November 2021. The series was created by Fortiche Production, in cooperation with Riot Games and is based on the universe of the multiplayer online battle arena game League of Legends. Nevertheless, although the series uses existing characters and lore, it narratively is a text on its own. Its form, thematic multiplicity and cinematography techniques make it possible to examine it both as a literary and visual narrative per se, not just as a game adaptation.

The first season comprises of nine episodes that were launched in three parts. The series is structurally interesting because it has a time-play that is manipulated intentionally. It starts in the middle, with a bloody battle between Piltover and Zaun, then switches to the eyes of the main protagonists as children. Between the first and the second acts, there is a great time gap, which makes the characters and their relations older. The chronological breakages make temporality one of the key organising principles of the story.

Most importantly, Arcane was met with a lot of praise regarding its visual ingenuity, characterization, and adult themes. Contrary to most of the animated series, which are linked to video game brands, it foregrounds psychological realism and moral ambiguity. The narrative is full of themes of class division, political power, technological ethics and trauma. The series is a combination of steampunk style with manual textures and dynamic light effects to form a visual language, which supports emotional and thematic meaning.

Notably to the purpose of the research question presented in this essay, the show frequently uses flashbacks, montage cuts, slow motion, and parallel editing as means of showing internal lives of characters, showing the time presented is not linear and stable, but broken down to mirror memory, anticipation, and regret. The influence of this, is the manipulation of the temporal focus becoming a structural tool and a thematic issue. The identities of the characters are influenced by events as well as by the manner in which these events are recalled, envisioned or experienced.

## **Setting and World Context**

The main conflict of the series occurs between the two cities of Piltover and Zaun. Geographically, the two cities are interconnected but they are socially, economically, and politically segregated.

Piltover is known as the City of Progress signifying the element of advancing, order and the authority of the city. It has a council of elites governing it and boasts of scientific progress and economic thrives. A new inventive technology called Hextech which is technology that runs on magical crystals causes a significant turning point in the growth of the city. Hextech represents the future: it is an assurance of change, effectiveness, and growth. Piltover architecturally is light, high, and exposed, and aesthetically linked with clarity and

progression.

On the contrary, Zaun lives under Piltover, literally and figuratively. It is rough, dirty and contaminated. Instability and survivalism characterizes the undercity. Whereas Piltover is looking forward, Zaun is having difficulties coping with the aftermath of political oppression and continued disregard of the past. The purple drug "Shimmer" in the context of Zaun that increases physical strength at the expense of physical injuries and psyche deformation spreads as the symbol of hopelessness and perverted development.

This is not just a backdrop of a socio-political separation, but it is central to the development of character. Zaun characters, like Vi, Jinx, and Ekko, have been raised in an environment of systemic violence and inequality. Their time experiences are influenced by trauma and instability. To them, survival is the order of the day taking precedence over long term planning. Contrarily, other characters like Jayce and the other members of the elite in Piltover find themselves in an institutional setup that enables them to think strategically and futuristically. There is also a history of rebellion in the world context. Several years prior to the main conflict of the series, an unsuccessful revolt by Zaun against Piltover left a great number of people dead. This political trauma constitutes the generation background of the story. The bridge massacre presented in the first episode creates a shared trauma that remains to influence the formation of relations and identities. Therefore, the war between the two cities is not merely economic but historical and even psychological.

In addition, magic and science coexist in this world, thus destabilising traditional binaries. Hextech is a combination of magic and mechanical technology, blurring the boundaries between magical history and technology. This combination strengthens the wider thematic interest of the series in the question of time: the past is the foundation of the future, and innovation brings with itself uncertain effects.

Time in this polarized world works in varying ways according to the social status. To

Piltover, time is growth and development. Time is repetition, survival and inherited trauma in the case of Zaun. The environment, thus, gives a macrocosmic echo of internal temporal struggle by the characters. It is through these structural inequalities that identity is developed, and changes in the time frame form a narrative device used to expose how people cope with a fragmented socio political environment. Showing personal trauma placed within wider historical and political context, Arcane makes sure that the movement of time is not necessarily singular and individual. Rather it is the product of generational conflict. This tension of the world that houses past wounds and future aspirations, supports the argument in the essay that identity and the narrative structure are largely focused on temporality.

### **Case Study 1 Vi - Past-Oriented Identity and Trauma.**

The character Vi is founded on the traumatic memory. The series starts with her parents dying in the middle of a political argument between Piltover and Zaun as the triggering event of her trauma and this death is shown in the very first scene of the series which takes place during a bridge. The scene with this bridge though presented in the beginning of the series structurally serves as an origin memory and reverberated throughout the series.

The image of young Vi protecting Powder, plus the visual aspect of the bridge scene, its blue color and smoky atmosphere, leaves a memory, which will echo through the series. The definition of trauma as given by Caruth is such that trauma is not limited to the point of violence but rather reverberates in unconscious recurrence. This unresolved trauma manifests itself in her protectiveness of Powder (then Jinx), in her violent attitude to the authorities, and in her irresponsible decision-making. The notion of duration by Genette is especially applicable to the time spent in prison of Vi. The story squeezes the time although the world of the story is more than several years old, and the reader only happens to glimpse her

imprisonment. This time-lapse is a arrested progression of the psyche. Vi is physically getting old but does not become wiser as she is still characterized by the trauma of her childhood when she was separated with Powder. Before losing her is fixed upon her identity. The repetition of the trauma can also be traced in the confrontation between Vi and Jinx. Vi does not accept the name that Jinx has created and still refers to her sister as Powder. At the linguistic and psychologic level, Vi is trying to turn back time. She wants reversal and not accommodation. Her failure to embrace change is an example of the idea of belatedness by Caruth where the traumatic event determines what is present and no longer allows the closure of the story. Vi is thus representation of a temporality that is past-sensitive where identity is achieved by means of repetition. The images and flashbacks offer a feeling that she cannot go on since she is bound to what has taken place.

### **Case Study 2: Jayce - Future-Oriented Progress and Ideology**

Vi has retroactive approaches, whereas Jayce is a futuristic character. His main driving power is evolution: technological creation as a savior. One of the proleptic moments that define his future plans is his childhood salvation by using the magic of the arcane--a experience of the potential that defines his future. Jayce has a goal-driven orientation towards the future, unlike trauma, which is unpredictable and recurrent. One of them is observed in the creation of the Hextech technology. The blue crystals are displayed as light blue and it represents enlightenment and advancement. The sequences of experimentations are usually associated with quick-moving montages and positive music, which are the representatives of the concept of speed. The pacing and editing provide a connection between the identity of Jayce and the speed and progress.

This story development is broken at the point where Hextech technology is implemented in weapons. Jayce is faced with the after-effects of his own invention. Shimmer

factory is burned down and a child is murdered in the raid. This plot becomes much slower, and it is more shock-inducing and morally disturbing. Whereas the storyline of Vi is repetitive, the storyline of Jayce is of the failure of imagined futurity. The moral compromise confronting Jayce with the issue of technological utopia puts this notion in doubt. Temporal perspective changes to negative reflection instead of positive projection. Vision and consequence is something Jayce has to synthesize. Jayce is commentary to progress as ideology. The idea of temporality previously as a sign of hope now has an ethical tint to it. Temporal projection proves to be prone to unanticipated effects. The question of identity which is pegged on the future vision turns risky when the future does not come the way it is supposed to come.

### **Case Study 3: Ekko – Present-Focused Resilience**

Ekko proposes another theory of time which bases on the present. Even though Ekko is also a victim of the same traumatic experience as Vi and Jinx, he is not haunted by it. Rather, he creates an understanding by means of the Firelights and develops them to thrive in the unfriendly world of Zaun. The presence of plants and warm light in the base of operations of Firelights is symbolic of Ekko being in the world. It is a living place and provides an alternative to bright but dead world of Piltover and dark and polluted world of Zaun.

One of the examples of the dramatic effects of manipulating the time in rewind sequences is the battle between Ekko and Jinx on the bridge. The what if scenarios are the incarnation of the frequency concept by Genette. There are a few options that are considered, yet the plot development goes on. Ekko did not live in the time loop. He is not obsessively harnessing his time knowledge. This is what makes him unlike Vi. Vi attempts to restore Powder, only to have Ekko identify Jinx as she is. He is open to change to act appropriately in the present. Trauma educates about his identity but is not his identity. Ekko is the ideal of harmony of time. He does not reject the past and never hopes that there will be a future but

rather he is at the present.

Ekko has the most harmonious balance of his experiences in time among all other characters that are being analyzed in this research.

### **Comparative Synthesis: Identity and Temporal Conflict**

In such case studies, Arcane is a collection of multiple-layered identities (temporally) of each character:

- I. Vi: Past-oriented; repetition trauma.
- II. Jayce: Future oriented; advance as ideology.
- III. Ekko: Here and now; resilience as grounded action.

The conflicts between the characters are not only based on the ideological confrontations, but also on the incompatibility of the time orientations. The need by Vi to go back to the past is in conflict with the push for progress by Jayce. The future orientation of Jayce is in conflict with the present orientation of Ekko. The whole hearted opposition of Vi is against the politics of prudence of Jayce. In these battles, the show postulates that the identity forms temporal attribute. The characters' experiences and ideals form their association with time. Trauma disturbs linear time.

Ambition pushes in a futurity. Preservation brings focus to the present. The series does not state that one temporal focus is superior to others. Instead, it tells the instabilities that are inherent in all. Memory can be imprisoning, the future can be deceiving, and even the present brings challenges as conflict against outside influences. This is reflected in the structure of the show on the narrative level. The outside of subjective time forms flashbacks, montages, slow scenes and repetition. The audience travels in time alongside the characters. Arcane employs film art to make time thematic.

## **Conclusion**

This essay has discussed how the series *Arcane* uses the techniques of temporal identity; flashbacks, pacing, repetition, and montage to point out identity formation and trauma. This essay has provided evidence of how the series uses the concepts of temporality mirror architecture of the psyche through the use of the theories of Gerard Genette and Cathy Caruth.

The identity of Vi is one that is anchored on unresolved past trauma. The identity of Jayce is founded on the ideology of technological futurity. The identity of Ekko is that of the resilience used in the present tense. All these identities reveal the fact that the series *Arcane* suggests that the identity is not something that is determined but is at least something linked with memory, ambition and adaptation.

Finally, the series suggests that the trauma is a wound which disrupts the course of chronology. The creation of identity does not occur in linear processes but as a result of conflict with temporal dislocation, through the use of psychological temporality in the structure of the narrative, *Arcane* suggests that the animated narrative can be driven to an extreme of psychological insight on how individuals live and move through their association with time.

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