



Winter 4-23-2018

The Master of Time

Rachel Aedo
Brigham Young University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/mssp>



Part of the [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Aedo, Rachel, "The Master of Time" (2018). *Modernist Short Story Project*. 6.
<https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/mssp/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Modernist Short Story Project by an authorized administrator of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

Rachel Aedo

ENGL 376

Watts

23 April 2018

“The Master of Time”

Norman Lindsay’s work in *The London Aphrodite* spanned more than a single short story in a single issue. His contribution to this periodical was due to more than his relationship with the editor—Jack Lindsay, creator of *The London Aphrodite*, was his son—rather, Norman Lindsay’s writing adhered strongly to the premise of the journal. The self-proclaimed cultural journal was set in defiance to the critical literary trends of the day, specifically in opposition to *The London Mercury*. “The Master of Time” appeared in the third volume of the *Aphrodite*. Thematically, Lindsay is addressing a distrust of humankind and the aesthetics of human life, within the context of highly narrative spoken prose. Lindsay’s form in this short story seats the audience in the midst of an extended monologue that explores the structure of a narrative over an extensive satirical argument.

Reminiscent of Jonathan Swift’s “A Modest Proposal,” Lindsay’s short story proposes an outrageous solution to overpopulation and old age through his main speaking character, the self-dubbed “The Master of Time” for his work with time as an element. The Master of Time’s main idea is that, through his experiments with time, he’s created a “time-electron” that, once prodded, will speed up time to function twice as fast, killing every person on earth over the age of 40 in the course of a few minutes, and allowing the youth of the generation to rise up and take control of the earth.

The themes of this argument are intriguing. The distrust of humanity permeates the entire narrative, yet is anchored to the concept that only the older generation is to be distrusted and disposed of. This introduces the idea that the youth of the earth are better able to manage the culture and government of the population better than their elders, a controversial idea that fits perfectly within the bounds of the *Aphrodite*. The sci-fi elements are also feel raw and new, though the genre had been invented a hundred years before, and Lindsay employs them excellently to avoid boring his reader with the Master's explanation of his experiment. The scientific talk is brought down to layman's terms, to include the reader in the conversation as the narrating secondary character is, creating a sense that the Master's talk is convincing not just the narrator but the reader as well. Thus, the Master's insane plan seems feasible and rational, though the reader still retains a secondary sense of the satirical nature of the story. Taken together, the reader is forced to reflect on the structure of our society, holding elders at the top and youths as depreciable. Perhaps this is where the true power of the short story is, in its ability to compel the public's questions towards affairs that could be improved for the betterment of man and society.

I am particularly drawn to how Lindsay structured and worded this story. When analyzed with Voyant Tools, the three most common words excepting stopwords were "time," "man," and "earth." For the sake of argument, I classify these as the three keywords to the Master's argument. Their connection reveals the progression of the logic behind the narrative. "Man" and "earth" are closely connected, mirroring each other in frequency, where "time" drastically jumps in frequency where the other two terms decrease.

The cause of this correlation is easy to understand. The Master speaks disparagingly of man's connection and impact on earth to lay the foundation for his dramatic solution. Though the

audience knows that the Master's answer to the influence of man on earth's history is not a realistic remedy, or even a good remedy, Lindsay has forced the root of the situation into the light for his audience to see. In tune with the *Aphrodite's* desire to unsettle praised literary critics, Lindsay's foundation for this story draws on the absurd nature of the elder generation and their need to control the world around them. He is deconstructing society from the top down, and placing power in the rising generation who shout for change and perhaps are better equipped to implement it. In general, this move on Lindsay's part gives potential to the people who might have no voice, in literary circles or in society. Effectively, this leads to the reader's right to question the literary criticism and recommendations they are being told are "cultural" and essential to their development as part of rising in society. In a larger sense, Lindsay is giving permission for people to question the structure they've supported and lived with. "Man" is most associated with "failure;" "earth" is associated with "dead."

The use of "time" far exceeds any other term in this short story, and peaks in usage near the end of the story. Much of this usage is due to the Master's lengthy explanation of the "time-electron"—the small particle that would effect the rest of the experiment. All other keyword usage becomes nearly nonexistent at this point in the story. "Man" is never used again after this point. This contrast implies that man and time should not be paired, an interesting observation in the light of the Master of Time's character. He is a man, and he is aware that his own death will be a result of this experiment. It is, in his mind, a sacrifice for the greater good. Yet, it is hard to characterize the Master as a villain or a hero. Lindsay is purposely ambiguous on this point. The narrator introduces the Master as a man to be disliked, to be distrusted, yet the Master is then able to introduce a mania on the narrator that persuades him to believe in the Master's cause. The promise of a better world is a temptation that is difficult to resist. By referring to himself as

“Master,” there is an allusion that allows the Master’s character to become interpreted as the god of the new world he is creating by manipulating time. He exhibits god-like power and creation, yet a simple reflection on the satire in Lindsay’s writing again introduces the feeling that the Master is not supposed to be perceived as “good,” in the dichotomy of good and evil.

Keeping with the idea, it is possible to interpret the narrator as a god character as well. There are two beliefs at play in this story, that God is one who intervenes, or that he is one who watches Man fall. The Master is portrayed as the god character who shapes the life of man on earth, intervening to allow for a better world to spring forth. Yet, the narrator who is sitting and listening and watching the Master experiment, represents the god character who stands by and lets Man fail, letting him experience life the way he chooses. The dichotomy is fascinating, in light of the Master’s argument that the world is bad and needs correction. Men like him are likely Lindsay’s source for the troubles the Master elaborates on—oppression, unfairness, or plain evil—for they are the products of choices made by men that are paralleled in the choice the Master is making, to force the deaths of the old to usher in the age of the young. The frequency of “youth” according to Voyant peaks in the middle of the story; similarly, the concept of all-powerful youth on earth is the central point of the Master of Time’s plan. Inversely, the frequency of “I” forms a near-perfect U-shape, indicating that the narrator is creating the story, in line with his characterization as a god.

The progression of the story, and the Master’s grounds for his solution, can be tracked in the keywords “time,” “man,” and “earth.” Predominate is the idea that time is changeable and a tool, to shape man and shape earth. Lindsay’s sci-fi storyline addresses issues that perhaps were uncomfortable to those functioning as distinguished literary critics, and subtly touched on subjects that were certainly under discussion in social circles of the period. The value of man

was reduced to his ability to enact good or evil in the space of time, though time did not function as a theme of the story as a reader might have expected it would. The satire of the subject is subtle as well; Lindsay refused to overtly poke fun at the ridiculous notion of his character, but rather added chilling elements that turned the story into a warning rather than a laughing joke at humankind. The narrative elements of the story split the reader between the narrator and the monologue-prone Master, intended to force the reader to split their expectations and beliefs between a drunk and frightened man and a mania-induced genius. The powers between the two are divided to give power and poise to each; though the narrator is swayed to the Master's thinking early on, he still exists for the reader to identify with, to allow for deeper reflection on the themes introduced once the story has ended. The periodical as a form was ephemeral, but Lindsay's story perfectly adjusts to the structure; the story is meant to live on in the mind once the paper copy has been left behind. Addressing highly controversial issues was one avenue for ensuring success, according to this formula. This particular story ends with a long ellipsis, as does the periodical as form. "The Master of Time" ideally utilizes the structure to ensure that the ideas behind the *Aphrodite* would continue to be relevant.