

Encountering Death: Towards a Deeper Understanding of Life in *Wit* and *Time*

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Abstract

Even though people know everyone has to die one day, it seems nobody realizes that this is a truth of life and they themselves are going to die. This is apparently a universal problem for all people and it causes them to live their lives in forgetfulness until the day they have to encounter death. This article aims to explore how the narrative techniques employed in Margaret Edson's *Wit* and Chart Korbjitti's *Time* induce each individual reader to contemplate death and meaning of life and stimulate them to question, criticize and evaluate his/her own life.

Key Words: Alienation effect; Brechtian techniques; Chart Korbjitti; Comparative literature; Death; Margaret Edson; Narrative techniques; *Time*; *Wit*

Death and the ways in which one encounters death are universal themes found throughout literature. Brother David Steindl-Rast in his forward to Thich Nhat Hanh's *Living Buddha, Living Christ* writes "...in the face of death, human hearts were most alive." This statement suggests the benefits of awareness of death which is always the beginning of self-awareness. How people encounter death is a crucial issue that helps them understand how to live a worthy life because experiencing suffering and understanding it constitute the path towards gaining insight into life itself. Somdet Pra Nyansamvara, the Supreme Patriarch of Thailand, postulates that,

To realize that everyone is born only to end up with death is very valuable. If we pay enough attention to this, it can be extremely beneficial to us and nothing can be compared with its worth. To encourage an individual and people to realize its great benefit, most sages in Buddhism teach people to practice dying before their death-day. They emphasize that people need to always practice dying at least once a day. (Somdet Pra Nyansamvara, 2010)

In "*Love and Knowledge in Margaret Edson's Wit*", Darin Pradittatsanee discussed the value of love and knowledge overlooked by people in present society, especially those in educational system, in the lieu of materials. The matter is discussed and illustrated through the protagonist's near-death experience (87-109). That article conjured up an idea of the positive side of death, the same motif employed in an awarded Thai experimental story *Time* by Chart Kobjitti. More importantly, the two stories share the same effects created by their outstanding narrative techniques which aim to challenge the audience and the reader. When perceived through a cross-cultural perspective, this demonstrates that even though people, either westerners or easterners, know birth, illness, and death are the truth of life, they fail to live in full awareness of these. Therefore, it is important for writers to incorporate appropriate different narrative techniques if they intend to generate interest in what is viewed

as mundane but, in reality, significant and to yield some intended results.

This essay examines the notion of death, perceptions of death and dying, the experience of encountering death, the benefits of this encounter, and the paradox of encountering death in a positive sense and how the dramatic and narrative techniques in the Pulitzer Prize-winning play *Wit* by Margaret Edson and the SEA Write award-winning experimental story *Time* by Chart Kobjitti effectively stimulate the reader to reflect, compare and evaluate. The narrative techniques used in both stories result in the deconstruction and then reconstruction of figure-perspectives by interrelating the information from the external communication system in the domain of the message receiver which includes the audience and the reader and the internal communication system which is the communication among the fictional figures with the mediating communication system created by having one of the fictional figure directly address the receiver in order to give the figures' utterance and the authorial comment.

Using the motifs of time and death, both texts present narrators who are forced to encounter death yet lack cognizance that they are meeting great opportunities to examine their own lives. Eventually, the central figures in both stories garner powerful lessons in life from their near-death experiences. Although the two stories are narrated through different cultures, they address questions concerning the meaning of life and death. They both employ complicated narrative techniques to inspire the receiver to reflect on death. What the receiver of the messages can learn from these stories is the contemplation of death which can lead to the pursuit of the meaning of life. It also supports realization of the way to let things go and peacefully accept death.

In *Wit*, the 'epic' theatrical techniques are deployed in order to instruct the receiver and arouse him/her to think. According to the writer of *The Theory and Analysis of Drama*, the three most important features associated with the concepts of 'epic' in drama are the abolition of finality, concentration, and dramatic autonomy (John, 1988). The first feature is evidenced by the end of the story. It is obvious

that whether Vivian comes to the full understanding of the truth about God and life is a subordinate matter because it is intended to be viewed as a model of reality that is open to be variable and open to change. Moreover, the story is intended to indicate that the final meaning for life does not subject to Vivian as a dramatic figure but to the receiver who must reconstruct the meaning for themselves. Second, the abolition of concentration brought about with the use of episodic structure which results in undermining suspense “to the extent that the spectators are able to distance themselves critically from the action, thus leaving them free to reflect, compare, and evaluate (John, 1988).” creates the alienation effect to the receiver. That the representative segment of the totality are portrayed by “introducing panoramic structures of time and place and having a comprehensive range of figures (John, 1988)” and that, in term of stage-design, the manner that Vivian addresses the receiver and “corresponds to the exposure of theatrical machinery and apparatus in order to create an anti-illusionist awareness of the set as a set, and the props as props (John, 1988)” resulted in reducing the dramatic autonomy.

With the ‘epic’ in drama, the central dramatic actress must play two roles for the two layers of communication systems—the internal and mediating communication systems. One is Vivian, a cancer patient functioning as the narrator of the mediating communication system in which Vivian as the narrator functions as a medium between the internal dramatic actions and the audience. She always appears on the empty stage with an I-V stand and gives her utterance or comments.

The first scene opens with the narrator Vivian wearing a baseball cap walking across the empty stage. It can be said that she is stylized personification of the consciousness of Professor Vivian who lies dying in hospital. Diagnosed with stage 4 ovarian cancer, she is suffering tremendously; she has only two hours remaining before she dies. The other role in the internal communication system is Professor Vivian Bearing, the central dramatic figure who always comes to the stage when props are being prepared by the staff. This Vivian is a fifty-year-old university professor of seventeenth-century poetry. She specializes

in John Donne's sonnets which discuss life, death and God. Thinking that she has real insights into these matters, she considers herself a woman of wit and intelligence. Vivian is very proud of her position as a professor doctor, following in the footsteps of her highly admired teacher, Professor E.M. Ashford, D.Phil. Although Vivian finds her sickness humiliating, her illness breaks down her pride and prepares her for dying. While struggling for life and trying to attain salvation through her belief in God, she gradually gains self-awareness through intense self-examination. She finally comes to the realization that while she was in good health, she lived her life as if she were not alive. She refused human relationships in lieu of promoting her intellect, fame and pride.

Encountering death is considered a great opportunity for Vivian the protagonist to perceive herself more clearly through the eyes of her doctors who consider her an object of their research. The doctors neither have sympathy nor appreciate communication with their patients. Though they deal with people dying every day, they never perceive it as a profound truth of life. Vivian's experience with these doctors prompts her to reflect on her past and realize that her lifetime attachments cannot help her any longer. She finally realizes that she cannot utilize her academic research or her knowledge to deal with her own dying. What she was once proud of turns out to be a false friend. After talking to nurse Susie, she finally admits that,

But it can't be helped. I don't see any other way. We are discussing life and death, not in the abstract, either; we are discussing *my* life and *my* death, and my brain is dulling...

(Quickly) Now is not the time for verbal swordplay, for unlikely flights of imagination and wildly shifting perspectives, for metaphysical conceit, for wit.

And nothing would be worse than a detailed scholarly analysis. Erudition. Interpretation. Complication.

(Slowly) Now is a time for simplicity. Now it is a time for, dare I say it, kindness.

(Searchingly) I thought being extremely smart would take care of it. But I see that I have been found out. Oooohhh.

I'm scared... (Edson, 1999)

In this scene after Susie finishing speaking, she leaves the stage. Then, Vivian as the narrator faces the audience and admits that as she is encountering death her illusion is destroyed. She eventually realizes that only spiritual insight can help her cope with the fear of death. Sharpening one's intellect with words and literary devices or engaging in a battle of wits proves to be useless. At this point, she learns that kindness and the warmth of human relationships are what people need to live a happy life. Thus, without faith in God and humanity, Vivian, the main figure of the flashbacks, is truly afraid of death and cannot calm her mind.

Through the process of self-examination, whenever Vivian the narrator gains insight into her present hospitalized situation, she compares it with her academic past. This approach helps create a strong contrast between Vivian as the patient and Vivian as the narrator. Moreover, the contrast is more emphasized in the scene which Jason and Vivian, who acts as the narrator while lying on bed as the patient, simultaneously speak in different contexts. In spite of that, the focus of the scene is placed on Vivian's comments. Vivian the narrator comments on the situation in which Jason, together with Kelekian and other doctors, is examining Vivian the cancer patient; the doctors treat her like an object or an experiment, not a human being. This message is presented through the special format of the dialogue as seen here:

Vivian: ‘Grand Rounds.’

...Here, ‘Rounds’ seems to signify darting *around* the main issue... which I suppose would be the struggle for life... *my* life...with heated discussions of side effects...

With one important difference: in Grand Round, *they* read *me* like a book. Once I did the teaching now I am taught. (Edson, 1999)

Jason: Very late detection...

At the time of first-look surgery, a significant part of the tumor was de-bulked, mostly in this area—*here*. (*He points to each organ, poking her abdomen.*) Left, right ovaries. Fallopian tubes. Uterus. All out.

Through ‘grand rounds’, a medical term referring to medical education and the presentation about patient care, Vivian plays with the meaning of the word ‘rounds’ by associating it with her condition. For her, to be a cancer patient becomes the first time she has an opportunity to examine her true self because she cannot take refuge in her intellect. As a result, she believes that all the doctors discussing her condition is the struggle ‘around’ her life, not about saving her life. Consequently, it is also the first time she realizes that though she used to teach people about life through literature she never really internalized the lessons. Then, when she was treated inhumanely, she learns the relative uselessness of her intellect. She eventually comes to the realization that human relationships and kindness are essential for life. Paradoxically, Vivian’s painful suffering becomes a vital learning experience for her. In spite of the fact that she studied Donne’s sonnets and contemplated

death, the soul and God as intellectual games, she only experiences them for the first time during her eight month treatment for cancer.

While her experience at the hospital dehumanizes her, it forces her to look within and discover her true self. She is gradually able to penetrate her own illusions by reflecting on the manner in which Dr. Kelekian and Dr. Jason are fascinated by research and intellect. This concept is demonstrated when Vivian speaks to the audience while reminiscing about the time when she refused to have sympathy for one of her students whose grandmother had passed away:

(Getting out of bed, without her I-V) So. The young doctor, like the senior scholar, prefers research to humanity. At the same time the senior scholar, in her pathetic state as a simpering victim, wishes the young doctor would take more interest in personal contact.

Now I suppose we shall see, through a series of flashbacks, how the senior scholar ruthlessly denied her simpering students the touch of human kindness she now seeks. (Edson, 1999)

Vivian clearly expresses her disillusionment. She has finally embraced humanity because she is physically and mentally weak and longs for human sympathy which the two doctors fail to give her. As a result, she realizes her own heartlessness towards one of her former students and finally comprehends her own blindness to another person's grief. She discovers that one cannot live happily on knowledge or fame but can only survive with kindness and close personal relationships. While healthy, Vivian believed that through her fame and intellect she could gain power to bring whatever she wanted, namely, reassurance and happiness.

Susie, the primary nurse, symbolizes a contrary perspective towards life than the other figures. Susie wholeheartedly takes care of Vivian, demonstrating that relationships and kindness are of the

greatest value as death approaches. Susie appreciates communication with people and knows very well how to keep her patients' hearts warm. Her actions contrast sharply with Dr. Jason's; for example, she touches and talks with Vivian even when Vivian is unconscious. She understands that for those near death, communication is the only way to relieve loneliness and fear.

Susie: (*Laughing, fondly*) Well, she hasn't exactly been a cup cake here, either. (*Leaning over VIVIAN and talking loudly and slowly in her ear*) Now, Ms. Bearing, Jason and I are here, and we're going to insert a catheter to collect your urine. It's not going to hurt, don't you worry. (*During the conversation she inserts the catheter.*)

Jason: Like she can hear you.

Susie: It's just nice to do. (Edson, 1999)

With Susie's kindness and sincere consideration for her, Vivian learns to develop relationships with other people and to accept the true nature of life. Finally, she has just realized her misconduct as a teacher who should have had compassion and mercy for students. Her misconduct is emphasized by the contrast between Vivian the narrator and Vivian the professor. The former is the voice of her consciousness while suffering in hospital, speaking tenderly to the audience as if she is confessing to her students while the latter represents Professor Vivian enjoying the complexity of a poem.

Vivian: (*Speaking to the audience*) Did I say (*tenderly*) "You are nineteen years old. You are so young. You don't know a sonnet from a steak sandwich." (*Pause*) By no means. ...(*She walks away from STUDENT 1, then turns and addresses the class.*)

So we have another instance of John Donne's agile wit at work: not so much *resolving* the issues of life and God as *reveling* in their complexity. (Edson, 1999)

As she is dying, Vivian comes to comprehend that a professor must also be a teacher. When she was in good health, she did not realize her responsibility to students, though her teacher, Professor Ashford, always treated her with understanding and kindness. As a professor of literature, Vivian did not teach her students but preferred to puzzle them with intellectual games while interpreting Donne's sonnets. In fact, this was just her unconscious manipulation of power over her students to produce the illusion that she could feel secure in her position. Conversely, Professor Ashford understood the nature of life and related it to the texts she taught. In the following quotation, she explains to Vivian about the negative effect of the wrong edition of the poem and then about death.

E.M.: ...Gardner's edition of the Holy Sonnets returns to the Westmoreland manuscript source of 1610—not for sentimental reasons, I assure you, but because Helen Gardner is a *scholar*. It reads:

And death shall be no more, *comma*, Death thou shalt die...
Nothing but a breath—a comma—separates life from life everlasting. It is very simple really. With the original punctuation restored, death is no longer something to act out on a stage, with exclamation points. It's a comma, a pause.

This way, the *uncompromising* way, one learns something from this poem, wouldn't you say? Life, death, Soul, God, Past, present. Not insuperable barriers, not semicolons, just a comma. (Edson, 1999)

As Ashford explains, the use of a comma suggests that no “insuperable barriers” separate life from death. She also teaches Vivian to be careful to select the right edition of the sonnet because to be a *scholar*, for Ashford, is to be a person of intellect with understanding of the meaning of life. Moreover, she teaches Vivian that she should go

and enjoy life in order to experience it; for wit and logic cannot help her understand life. Even though to work thoroughly on any literary work is crucial, one important role of studying literature is to enhance one's understanding of the nature and meaning of life. Unfortunately, Vivian totally missed the point; instead of enjoying life with her friends as Ashford advised, she went straight to the library. She failed to comprehend that to accept the nature of life is the only way to understand the sonnet, but, according to the quotation, Vivian in the past still gave priority to wit and complexity in Donne's sonnets in spite of labeling it "the issues of life and God" which are actually a matter of spirit and practice.

This is further emphasized when her student gave a suggestion about the sonnet about Donne's sonnet and the meaning of life. One of her smartest students significantly points out the reason that the poet wrote the sonnet was that he might have been scared, so he tried to hide behind his complicated sonnets and behind his wit or else the poet should have made it simpler (Edson, 1999). However, at that time Vivian was not brave enough to admit this since the same reason as the poet has haunts her own immature mind. That scene shows that before she was ill, she failed to fathom that she herself was mortal. Poignantly, she was truly awakened to life through her own process of dying. The fear of death and the complexity of word play in Donne's sonnets mirror Vivian's feelings and attitudes towards death and God. Unwittingly, this is emphasized in her mind throughout the play.

In spiritual terms, no matter how intelligent Vivian might be, what she must value most is her spirit and faith in God. While she is encountering death, to keep faith in God is her only reliable source. Nevertheless, at first she remains attached to her intellect. Moreover, she tries to deny and dare death as evidenced by her frequent recital of the words, 'Death be not Proud.' Reciting the poem implies that she is trying to empower herself and to decode the mystery of death in order to conceal her fear. Unknowingly, while resisting death, she is denying God. In truth, she would be much better advised to take just the opposite perspective. For example, when she explains the sonnet 'If poisonous

minerals' (sic) she explains that "...The speaker does not need to *hide* from God's *judgment*, only to accept God's *forgiveness*. It is very simple. Suspiciously simple". (Edson, 1999)

As Socrates said, "the unexamined life is not worth living (Kamerling, 2010)." Vivian only takes this courageous leap at the last moment because she finally learned through suffering to examine, to fear, to get angry about, to resist and finally to accept death as it is. When she experiences the anxiety of death and tries to believe in God, not as a textual experience, which is the way to salvation, it is simultaneously the first significant step towards touching the energy of the Holy Spirit within herself. Even though it remains ambiguous whether or not Vivian finally attains true faith in God or not, she learns the most precious lesson which is how to live a meaningful life.

All discussed above are the messages conveyed through the interrelating the internal communication system with the external communication system. As a result, the audience as the receiver is induced to follow the unfolding story continuously, and to stimulate them to reflect, question, and comment on what they are watching and what Vivian the narrator confides to them. The internal communication system are interrelated by Vivian the narrator who functions as the mediating figure. When Vivian the narrator addresses the receiver directly, she metaphorically "distance herself from the dramatic action and comment on it from the outside... and steps outside her role in order to break the illusion". (John, 1988) For instance, when Vivian the narrator challenges the receiver to put themselves in Vivian's situation by saying that to sit and watch eight months of cancer treatment is boring for the *audience*, it is quite clear that the author intentionally implies that Vivian as the patient should be regarded as an agent of people who are in suffering and the *audience* members represent normal people who shun other people's suffering. After challenging, she continues teasing and daring the audience by saying in an ironic voice that she will not force them to watch her lying on the bed for fifteen minutes because as a person of wit she will choose to illustrate what has happened to her and to express

her feelings in a succinct way (Edson, 1999).

Furthermore, the alienation effect also encourages the audience to question and comment on what is happening on stage instead of identifying themselves with the dramatic figures. Thus, the whole story conveys a commentary about the narrator's life as presented in the flashbacks. As a result, this technique aims to conjure two simultaneous feelings in the audience. One, the alienation effect aims to avoid causing emotional effects on the audience. The disconnected montage of scenes, together with staging that empowers the audience to witness the staff pushing the patient's bed and other props on the stage, aims to make the audience feel alienated, question, and try to conceptualize what is truly happening to Vivian and other figures. Second, after compelling the alienation effect, in the final part, the story induces the receiver to involve emotionally in the figure's torment because the narrator does not step outside the dramatic action any longer but there is only the illustration of Vivian as the patient who lies in bed, dying. Therefore, whether the dramatic figures learn anything or not is not important because the play's purpose is to stimulate the audience to deconstruct the message through the figure-perspective and then to reconstruct the meaning from the message by themselves.

Despite cultural differences, the theme of life and death that is examined in *Wit* can be found in *Time*, a Thai novel written by Chart Kobjitti. Kobjitti wrote *Time* as an experimental fictional story, in which various narrative techniques of experimental drama are incorporated with four narrative forms: a play, a screenplay, a descriptive narrative and stream-of-consciousness. With the motif of time and death, this experimental story discusses the perception of life in an existential light. He also embraces the essential Buddhist notion that all existence is subject to impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and lack of self.

However, it is worth to note that the Buddhist notion he applies in the story is superficial and shows his misunderstanding of the matter shared by most laypersons. The Buddhist notion in Kobjitti's view is that because everybody is going to be ill, to be older, and to die one day,

their lives become empty and nothingness. This superficial interpretation is at discrepant level when compared with the philosophical meaning as described either in Tripitaka or by Buddhist sages who possess insightful experience from their practices. Moreover, the existentialistic idea employed in *Time* is also superficial in the same way. Nevertheless, when those drawbacks are compared with the effectiveness of the narrative techniques used in this story, they seem to create no effects on the story at all because Kobjitti is an experienced writer and “knows how to put his little knowledge to good use (Nagavajara, 1996).”

The narrator of *Time* is a workaholic film director, who is presented as ‘I’. He acts like a member of the audience watching an experimental stage drama conducted by university students. The performance on stage revolves around elderly people’s lives in a nursing home. The performance on stage conveys messages concerning emptiness or the Buddhist notion of lack of self through the notion of ‘time’ by focusing on what time brings about and how time is powerful. The dramatic figures on stage include six old women, a monk, vendors, a few kids and two mad men. The main figures in the stage drama are old women with various perspectives concerning life, aging and death. The stage drama also features in the secondary text—other things except the verbal dialogues between figures—a symbolic old clock and silver shadow of lotuses.

The structure for conveying messages in *Time* is more complicated than in *Wit* because the former conveys messages through only one theatrical technique. The messages in *Time* can be divided into three levels and the most emphasis is placed on the outermost level which the targeted-receiver is the reader. At the innermost level, *Time* presents its ideas through the perspectives of the dramatic figures in the stage drama such as Sorn, Yoo and two mad men. Sorn is the main figure who expresses her ideas concerning the power of time and the Buddhist concept of the three primary characteristics of existence. She is the only figure who learns life lessons from other figures’ conditions. The messages of this level are illustrated in forms of play which sometimes

are shifted to screenplays. At the next level, the film director who is the main narrator is the main figure of *Time*. He reflects on the performance on stage and expresses his perception of life, aging and death. The film director's utterance is narrated through the first person point of view in the stream-of-consciousness mode. Finally, with a particular narrative technique, the message of the story is derived from the reader who is reading this experimental story about the film director watching a stage drama about the elderly. All of these three levels are bridged with the voice of an omniscient narrator. *Time* deceives the reader into thinking that the film director himself is being criticized. If the reader believes in this, s/he is trapped. On the contrary, *Time* aims at stimulating the reader to critically reflect on both Old Sorn's experience and the film director's ideas in order to gain lessons from the story.

At the innermost level, the two significant dramatic figures, Sorn and Yoo, were named for the sake of the receiver's perspective. Sorn whose name means 'teaching' in Thai, represents an individual who always touches on the idea of the three characteristics of existence, yet still cannot let things go with equanimity. Nevertheless, if the receiver looks into the story from the outermost to the innermost levels, the meaning of her name is clearly indicative of the author's purpose that Sorn is intended to teach the receiver some life lessons. Despite being named Sorn, in the dramatic situations she herself is prepared to learn the truth of life at all times. She realizes that all human beings are slaves to things in the world, especially money, aging, sickness and time. For example, when a boy talked to her about power over human beings, she insists that everybody is a slave to things in their lives (Kobjitti, 2003).

Sorn is the only figure in the nursing home who points out the disadvantages of money. She explains to Nuan and Erp that money is not always good because sometimes it hurts people; for example, when being robbed, being cheated or being killed because of money (Kobjitti, 2003). She uses the mad naked man in the cell who was once a rich man as an example to demonstrate her opinion.

Old Sorn: (Smiles.) ‘Oh, I see. I didn’t. I wasn’t pointin’ at your bed at all. I was point’ at the cell. I was sayin’ that he had bags of money but finally he had to come and stay here as well.’ (Kobjitti, 2003)

Moreover, Sorn is the only person on stage who understands the messages hidden in the mad men’s words. She realizes the value of death and the power of ‘time.’ When she is contemplating Thapthim’s mad son’s story of the white lotus in a blood swamp, she thinks of what she discussed with the young man. She discovers the answer that the master of all beings is ‘time.’ After Yoo’s death, she contemplates death as if it were her own; through this she gains wisdom about the nature of life and laughs out loud.

My dear Yoo, this isn’t you any longer. You’ve disappeared. The body lyin’ in front of me here isn’t you. It’s just a corpse. A human corpse. What lies here is but a corpse. As for the part that was you, my friend, it has disappeared. What lies smilin’ here isn’t my friend Yoo. I don’t know who it is. It’s just a human body.....

What she sees here is nothing but corpses. Standing corpses looking at a corpse.

I’m a corpse too, ... (Kobjitti, 2003)

Yoo, one of the figures on stage, leads other people, including the film director, closer to the revelation of the truth of life: Everyone is subject to the three characteristics of existence and finally reaches the state of emptiness. She is paralyzed and gradually becomes weaker during the course of the story. Despite her name meaning ‘to be alive’ or ‘to exist,’ she is without strength to do activities and without voice to express her cravings. This impasse illustrates the impermanence of life. The disparity of her condition and the meaning of her name strengthen a message that everyone is going to die one day. This seems to be the simple truth everyone knows, yet it is what everyone forgets. The

uncertainty of life is further emphasized in the flashbacks of Yoo's life. The flashbacks show that her life does not differ from the others in the nursing home. She was deceived and abandoned by her children and then ends up her life in a lonely home for the elderly. Her life clearly symbolizes Buddhist notion of the transitory nature of life.

In addition to Sorn and Yoo, the mad man in the cell and Thapthim's mad son can be regarded as messengers who convey the theme of the story. The mad man in the cell always says, 'There's nothing. There's nothing at all! There's absolutely nothing.' This emphasizes that people should be attached to anything. Thapthim's mad son's story about the white lotus flowers symbolically indicates that people are fighting for wealth and fame. In reality, these are of no significance because those things are not what people can bring with them when they die.

'Where were you for so long?' Old Sorn asks.

'At the big swamp. There are big white lotus flowers. Their shadows in the water are like silver. The fish swarmed around to eat the silver, fought over it, bit one another.' He laughs delightedly...

'Where? Where?' Old Sorn asks.

'In town. They bit each other to death all over the swamp. Fought over themselves to eat the lotus shadow. None of them could eat the lotus shadow.'

'Why, son? Why couldn't they eat the lotus shadow?...

'Nobody can eat the lotus shadow. It's only a shadow, ah,ah!' He laughs uproariously. (Kobjitti, 2003)

Ironically, while other figures claim to be in their right minds, they all embrace every sort of illusion. Therefore, the mad men serve as effective literary devices to satirize the conditions of a society full of materialistic people fighting for the silver shadows of white lotuses. The satirical sense is transferred into a sense of humor when Sorn wonders whether she is also going to be a mad woman because she communicates so well with the two mad men.

Despite the stage drama director's attempt, the film director and other people in the audience fail to comprehend any messages conveyed through the drama. Whereas Sorn almost finds the truth of life, the film director does not fully understand Buddhist philosophy portrayed by the mad men. At least he realizes that the way he has lived his life has been wrong. When all the lights on stage are turned off, he contemplates death. His thinking shows a glimpse of the existentialistic idea, which "argues the 'absurdity' of an existence in which an individual never knows when the life s/he seeks to endow with meaning will be terminated (Herlands, 2002)" so an individual must accept the consequences of choices in life.

The performance on stage arouses the film director to reconsider his view of life. In terms of theatrical techniques, the performance on stage succeeds in using characteristics of naturalistic drama such as employing the smell of urine and an old clock ticking away for ten minutes, to induce boredom in the audience. Whenever the film director feels bored of the picture on stage, he comments on the dramatic figures' circumstances and his own life and discusses them in two forms—in the form of screenplays adapted from the play he is watching and in the form of stream-of-consciousness of his comments and feelings.

The performance at which I sit smelling urine is the seven o'clock performance. The audience is sparse. I don't know if it's because the show has run its course or because the play is really boring, as the critics say...

If this play was showing something interesting I'm sure nobody would mind the ten minutes gone by, or if some did, it'd be to regret that time had gone by so fast. But not here, not now, with everybody having to sit looking at the clock ticking away, having to sit looking at a lack of action. Even though it'd be the same ten minutes in both cases... (Kobjitti, 2003)

In this initial part of the story, the film director and other people in the audience show the reader how people who are ignorant to the importance of flying time waste their time. Though life is uncertain and mundane, people are not patient enough to calmly wait and see what is going on in their minds and bodies. On the contrary, they always find something to entertain themselves and kill time. Consequently, they cannot perceive the true nature of life; maybe they are not brave enough to face it. Although the film director, as a member of the audience, does not realize the influence of ‘time’ that the producer of the play intends to communicate, to some extent, the intended effect of the theatrical techniques of this performance has been achieved. Therefore, the film director questions the meaning of his own life. For instance, when he contemplates his life after his wife and daughter’s deaths, he asks himself what he should do when the last day of his life arrives.

I was fed up with life.

Until one day I asked myself, why should I keep living like this?

I should kill myself.

But finally—finally I decided to go on living.

I asked myself, if I keep on living, how will I live, and what for?

I began to look at what I lost. I had lost my daughter, I had lost my wife, but I still had work to do....

But when I see those bodies on that stage lying there being fed, I’m scared. I’m damn scared—scared to have to live like this, to live unable to do anything, not even bring rice to my mouth. If such a day comes, what will I do with my life? But why think about this while the time hasn’t come?..(Kobjitti, 2003)

However, this does not suggest that the director failed to garner any message from those boring scenes on the stage; as he comments on them, he finally admits and realizes that he is a heartless workaholic father to his daughter even when she is dead (Kobjitti, 2003). His

realization strikes him after emotionally absorbing what is happening in the drama. This insight occurs immediately after Jan, one of the dramatic figures, explains that parents are never heartless with their children; only children are ungrateful to their parents.

The film director is an agent of people in reality who forget that life itself is really mundane. In truth, people do not need anything else more than what can relieve their physical and emotional needs. Poignantly, they fail to take cognizance of that truth but they struggle to pass time with whatever contents them so that they can forget the reality of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and lack of a self which appear in every moment of life.

Seemingly, the drama is intentionally designed to unfold the story this way. Ironically, the boring scenes on the stage that the film director describes as the weak point of the play are actually the strong point. Like ordinary people who want to liberate themselves from impermanence in life, the film director lives in forgetfulness. He is blind to the fact that he also lives under the control of time which powerfully drags all beings with it to revolve around uncertainty and unsatisfactoriness that cause suffering. This point is emphasized when the director is thinking, “If this sequence was in my film, it wouldn’t take more than one minute for the time shown on the clock to reach five o’clock as desired. But this is the time on a theatre stage. So I have to sit and wait (Kobjitti, 2003).”

Not only the film director and others in the audience but also many figures in the stage drama criticise and react to other figures’ circumstances inconsiderately. The way that people carelessly look at other people’s problems, regarding those problems as something not related to them, blinds them to the fact that can set them free at the end of life. They are not aware of the simple depiction of reality disguised as the figures’ lives in drama. It is undeniable that if the film director and others in the audience profoundly considered the performance, they would recognize that they are not different from those figures on stage.

To instruct, it seems that every figure on stage is intentionally characterized as a group of people who lack spiritual development and

let their spirit be devoured by all defilements. This is shown when the old women are praying for their worldly wishes after offering food to a monk. Although they are very old and experienced, they still have ceaseless cravings for things which have not come and they still cannot accept those things that already exist.

Regarding the innermost communication, except Sorn, every figure lives in illusion. Most of them are blind to the timeless truth revealed by illness and death. Since aging is viewed as a sign of near-death, the elderly in the nursing home are treated by their children as if they were useless things in a storage room. Both those who abandon their parents and the elderly themselves do not realize the great opportunities to learn about the nature of life as the Venerable Buddhadasa Bhikkhu once said,

Illness should be regarded as a common characteristic of bodies, both human beings' and animals' bodies, because all kinds of body are changing all the time...Especially, when a person is getting older and older, it seems that the rest of one's life is imprisoned by illness. All of these are the truth of reality that we need to look at. (Buddhadasa, 2010)

Even though aging and sickness should be good sources for spiritual awakening, the elderly in the drama are overwhelmed with their cravings and impossible hopes. Bunruean, Jan, Sorn, Thapthim, Erp and Nuan's lives and hopes are still flowing like people who try to deny the existence of death by hiding within illusions. They are attached to what they have been familiar with their entire lives. For instance, Bunruean is always hankering for wealth and her past life as an aristocratic lady and thinks that her life in the home is unacceptable.

The structure of the narrative technique in *Time* that lets the reader, which is here mentioned as the receiver, know every idea, feeling and perception of life from all the figures stimulates the need to reconstruct the meaning of life for themselves. The meaning-making at this third level is achieved by questioning and criticizing all of the perceptions

of life from all the fictional figures—both those in the drama and in the audience. In this story, every consequence of whatever happens on stage is important in the way that it affects the film director's feelings and attitudes. Up until the time when the film director is forced to contemplate boredom and life, he has never enjoyed the present moment or realized the inevitable approach of death. On the contrary, he always plans the future, even when his daughter dies. Many life lessons appear on the stage but above all the focus is on the issue of impermanence and lack of a self. Then the figures' perspectives on life are deconstructed and reconstructed through the receiver's perspective. The feelings of the elderly are performed and communicated to the intended receiver in the outermost level through the dialogues between the figures and descriptions narrated through a limited omniscient point of view. Kobjitti intended to stimulate the reader to question life through the stage drama and the film director's view.

At least, it can be said that the drama was successful in encouraging people to reflect how an individual lives his/her life and in reminding the receiver that they are getting old and one day they are going to die. Even though Sorn and the film director have different views towards the meaning of life, they are ready to encounter death with peaceful minds as represented by an old clock on the wall. This is described many times on the stage throughout the story. The description of people's feelings when waiting for time running stresses the power of time that hangs and weighs over them.

It is only an empty room.

An empty room.

After a while, the light dims then goes out.

The clock strikes seven times.

Ticktack-ticktack.

Ticktack-ticktack is still heard all the time. The curtain slowly unrolls and falls. (Kobjitti, 2003)

Viewed in its totality, the similar communication structures in *Wit* and *Time* can be divided into three systems of communication as previously discussed. That the authors eliminate the separation of the internal and external communication systems by creating the mediating communication system to bridge the two systems is the key factor of the two stories. The mediating communication systems in the stories are constructed by having Vivian as the narrator and the film director, who is presented through the first person point of view which produce a similar effect as the alienation effect in drama does, function as mediating figures by directly addressing the receiver in the two stories respectively.

Furthermore, the authors utilize appropriate techniques of characterization and presentation. Both Vivian and the film director are allegorical figures of people in society who have lived in forgetfulness and blind to the truth of life until the day they come to an impasse when encountering death, either in American or Thai society. Ostensibly, the messages of the two stories involve philosophical notions of death in religious terms, but in actuality encountering death and its effect are their emphases. Therefore, despite embracing the Buddhist notion of the three common characteristics of existence, that Kobjitti deploys the superficial interpretation of the notion does not significantly influence the important messages of the stories. Instead, this seems to be compatible with the main purpose of the story that aims to stimulate the receiver to reflect on the meaning of life. Similarly, in *Wit*, though no trace of the explanation excerpted from the Bible, the authorial intention to arouse the receiver to reflect on the meaning of life is still effective.

In *Wit* and *Time*, when both protagonists seek their own reliable sources for their spirit while encountering death, it is evident that they are not profoundly interested in religions but they consider religions as their first sources just because of their social-culture. Even though Vivian and the film director question what the meaning of life is and they have carried on the internal struggles to find their own resolutions throughout the stories, seemingly at the end of the stories the authors

intentionally do not put the finality and leave the receiver to variably reconstruct answers to those questions for each individual. Even though the processes to convey the important messages of the two stories to the receiver are incompatible in details, they share the overall process in conveying the messages to their receivers. As discussed in the introductory part, the process to do so comprises four steps that are to construct the meaning through the dramatic actions among the figures in the stories, to communicate the meaning to the receiver, to arouse the receiver to deconstruct the meaning and finally to stimulate the receiver to reconstruct the meaning for themselves.

In the final analysis, the microcosm in the two stories illustrated how suffering and cravings are complicated and how they can lure people to commit both good and bad actions. Thus people need to perceive and comprehend them correctly. For that complication in human's minds, it is crucial to attract the receiver's interest by making the two stories effectively function as entertainment and instruction. The analysis of the two stories shows that different beliefs are not a major hindrance to disclose the meaning of life. The stories reveal that people in the level of macrocosm always embrace delusions that they can control everything in life in spite of the fact that they are slaves to suffering, loneliness, illusion and cravings as exemplified in *Wit* and *Time*. From the two stories, the main figures, as agents of ordinary people in societies, present us that, paradoxically, most people are not aware of the truth of life and refuse to accept undesirable feelings and the nature of life such as suffering, despair, loss, defeat, and death which commonly happen in everyone's life when they are in good condition. Only when they are encountering death, they become really alive because with fear of death they are forced to examine their lives in order to find out what the meaning of life is. To disclose the truth of life and to demonstrate that all unsatisfactory ones and even death do not have only negative effects but provide spiritual growth and wisdom for people who are brave enough to encounter and accept them are crucial points. Therefore, as evidenced by the above discussion, certain theatrical and literary techniques are essential.

All in all, it would be worthy if we practice dying by reminding ourselves of our coming-death-day as often as it is possible before our last day comes. This is in order that when we are still alive and healthy, we can be really involved in life and on our death-day we will be prepared and ready to sleep peacefully and let things go. Moreover, the two stories suggest that the most important ability people should develop are the ability to appreciate human relationships, as well as the ability to diminish pride and to be more humble and grateful to everything and everyone in their lives so they can be fully human.

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