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# Chronotope as a Factor in Personality Formation: A Comparative Study of Charles Dickens's Oliver Twist and Gafur Gulam's Shum bola

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**Abstract:** This article examines how literary space-time, defined by Mikhail Bakhtin as the chronotope, shapes the formation of a child's personality in two novels from different cultural traditions: Charles Dickens's Oliver Twist (1837–39) and Gafur Gulam's Shum bola (1936). Although the works belong to different historical contexts, Victorian England and late imperial Turkestan, both place a socially vulnerable child at the centre of a hostile urban world and trace how that world acts upon him. Using Bakhtin's typology of chronotopes (the road, the threshold, the idyll, adventure time and everyday time) combined with a comparative-typological method, the study shows that Oliver Twist builds personality as an essence that is tested and finally recognised, so that its chronotopes work as stages of ordeal leading to restored identity. Shum bola, by contrast, builds personality as a process of adaptation, in which the everyday, communal chronotopes of the street, bazaar and neighbourhood, together with the double time of retrospective first-person narration, make the hero an active, humorous, self-fashioning subject. The comparison suggests that chronotope is not only a formal category but a model of how each culture understands the making of a person: providential and recognitive in Dickens, social and dialogic in G'ulom.

**Keywords:** chronotope; personality formation; Bildungsroman; Charles Dickens; Gafur Gulam; Oliver Twist; Shum bola; comparative literature; Bakhtin.

## Introduction

The orphaned or neglected child moving through a harsh city is one of the most productive figures in nineteenth- and twentieth-century prose. In English literature the figure is most strongly associated with Dickens, whose Oliver Twist made the workhouse boy a symbol of Victorian social conscience. In Uzbek literature a comparable position is held by the hero of Gafur Gulam's Shum bola, a semi-autobiographical narrative of childhood in Tashkent in the early twentieth century. The two books differ in genre mode (a melodramatic social novel and a humorous autobiographical tale), in narrative perspective (third-person omniscience and first-person memory) and in the historical conditions they represent. Yet both ask the same question: how does a child without secure family protection become a person?

The thesis of this article is that the answer each text gives is encoded in its organisation of space and time. In Bakhtin's words, the chronotope is "the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 84). Places in a novel are never neutral backdrops; they carry specific kinds of time (cyclical, adventurous, biographical, everyday) and therefore specific kinds of experience and development. A hero who

spends his formative years in a workhouse, on a road, or in a bazaar is not simply located in these places but formed through the temporal rhythms they impose.

The aim of the study is to compare the chronotopic structure of Oliver Twist and Shum bola and to determine how each structure models personality formation. The research questions are:

1. Which chronotopes organise the child's experience in each novel?
2. How does each chronotope influence the hero's moral and social development?
3. What do the similarities and differences reveal about the conceptions of personality in the two literary traditions?

The novelty of the work lies in bringing together a canonical English novel and a canonical Uzbek one under a single theoretical lens. Dickens has been compared with Thackeray, Dostoevsky, Gogol and Hugo (Canning, 1967; Lary, 1973), but comparative studies of Dickens and Uzbek prose remain rare, and the chronotope has seldom been used as the main comparative category for either text.

## 2. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

### 2.1. The chronotope

Bakhtin introduced the term chronotope (from Greek chronos, "time," and topos, "place") in his essay "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel," written in the 1930s and supplemented in 1973 (Bakhtin, 1981; Bakhtin, 1975). He borrowed the term from relativity theory but used it, by his own account, almost as a metaphor, to describe how literary genres fuse time indicators and spatial indicators into a meaningful whole. In that essay he describes several recurring types: the chronotope of adventure time in the Greek romance, the chronotope of everyday time in the ancient biography and in Apuleius, the chronotope of the road and of the meeting, the chronotope of the threshold (of crisis and turning point), the provincial town, the salon, and the idyll. Bakhtin also insisted that chronotopes have an "image-bearing" significance and that the chronotope determines "the image of man" in literature (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 85).

Bakhtin's later essay on the Bildungsroman (1986) is especially relevant, because there he distinguishes types of novel according to how they treat human becoming. He argues that the most significant type is the one in which the hero's development is bound up with historical time, so that "man's emergence" is inseparable from the emergence of the world (Bakhtin, 1986, pp. 23–24). This distinction between a static hero who is revealed and a dynamic hero who is formed is central to the present comparison.

Subsequent scholarship has refined and extended the concept. Morson and Emerson (1990) clarify its place in Bakhtin's wider philosophy of prosaics; Holquist (2002) situates it within dialogism; Vice (1997) offers an accessible account; and the collected volume edited by Bemong et al. (2010) demonstrates its applicability to modern narrative, film and cultural analysis. Keunen (2001) proposes reading chronotopes as cognitive schemata through which readers organise narrative experience. This cognitive turn matters here, because the chronotope is understood not only as a property of the text but as a way in which both character and reader model human development.

### 2.2. Dickens criticism and space-time

Dickens criticism has long been attentive to place, if not always to the term chronotope. Miller (1958) shows how Dickens's fictional worlds produce individual identity through the

relation of self to its surroundings. Welsh (1971) reads the city as Dickens's central symbol, and Williams (1973) analyses the changing relation between country and city in the English novel, in which Dickens's London is a decisive stage. Marcus (1965) examines the early novels, including Oliver Twist, in their social and generic context. The Leavises (1970) defend Dickens's later novels as serious works of art but offer less on the early ones. The reception history collected by Collins (1971) shows that contemporaries already debated the truthfulness of the novel's depiction of workhouse and criminal London. Hollingsworth (1963) places Oliver Twist within the Newgate novel controversy, a context in which Dickens's moral framing of crime is part of the novel's meaning. For general biographical and critical background, Slater (2009) remains a standard guide.

On the Bildungsroman as a European form, Buckley (1974) traces the "season of youth" from Dickens to the twentieth century, and Moretti (1987) argues that the genre expresses the modern tension between socialisation and individual freedom. Oliver Twist is usually considered only a partial or "proto" case, since its hero changes very little in character, while David Copperfield and Great Expectations are treated as full examples.

**2.3. Shum bola in Uzbek criticism**

G'afur G'ulom (1903–1966) is one of the founders of modern Uzbek literature, a poet, prose writer, translator and public figure. His Shum bola (first published in 1936) is widely regarded as a classic of Uzbek prose about childhood, noted for its humour, its colloquial narrative voice and its vivid depiction of life in pre-revolutionary Tashkent. Uzbek literary studies treat the work as autobiographical in inspiration, as a story of a child growing up amid poverty, war-time hardship and colonial conditions, and as an example of the humorous-realistic tradition. General Uzbek theoretical resources on narrative, hero and genre are available in Quronov, Mamajonov and Sheraliyeva (2013). Research that applies Bakhtin's chronotope directly to Shum bola, and still more research that compares it with Dickens, is limited, and this is the gap that the present study addresses.

**3. Methodology**

The study employs a qualitative, text-centred design that combines three methods.

**Chronotopic analysis.** Following Bakhtin (1981), the analysis identifies the principal spatial settings of each work, the kind of time that dominates each (adventure time, everyday time, biographical time, cyclical or idyllic time), and the type of events and character behaviour that each setting makes possible.

**Comparative-typological method.** Chronotopes from the two novels are compared according to function: what role they play in the hero's formation, rather than whether they share a name or physical form. A workhouse and a mahalla (neighbourhood community) are not "the same place," but both can be analysed as primary institutions of the child's socialisation.

**Historical-contextual reading.** Each chronotope is read in relation to its social background: the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 and the urban poverty of industrial England for Dickens (Slater, 2009; Marcus, 1965), and the late imperial, colonial and war-time conditions of Turkestan for G'ulom.

The primary texts are Dickens (2003) and Gafur Gulam (the 1936 first edition and its later reprints). Because the second text is read in Uzbek and the first in English, quotations are kept to a

minimum and analytical claims are based on the structure of the narrative rather than on stylistic details that could be altered by translation.

**4. Oliver Twist: Chronotopes of Ordeal and Recognition**

**4.1. The workhouse as a chronotope of institutional time**

The novel opens in an institution whose time is administrative and mechanical: mealtimes, rations and the regulated, repetitive life of the parish workhouse. This is a chronotope of enclosure in which individual time is suppressed. The famous scene in which the boy asks for more gruel ("Please, sir, I want some more") is the first act of personal initiative in the novel, and it is immediately punished by expulsion. The workhouse therefore functions as a threshold in Bakhtin's sense, a place of crisis and break, but with a reversal: it does not give the hero a new life but removes him from the closed world of the parish.

Crucially, the workhouse does not form Oliver's character. Dickens makes this point explicitly, by presenting the boy as inherently gentle and morally sensitive despite the surroundings. The institution acts upon the body (hunger, labour, punishment) but not on the "essence" of the child. This is the first indication that the novel's chronotopes serve a concept of personality as innate and protected.

**4.2. The road as a chronotope of displacement and chance**

Oliver's journey from the provincial setting to London has the typical features of Bakhtin's road chronotope: spatial movement is combined with the accumulation of chance encounters (the Artful Dodger appears at the end of the road at the exact moment when the exhausted child needs help). Bakhtin notes that the road is the place of "random contingency" where "the course of a single human life" and the paths of many different people meet (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 243). Here the encounter is ambiguous: it brings the hero both rescue and danger. The road is also an adventure-time device. Time on the road is not biographical but eventful, a series of episodes which do not alter the child's inner nature but test it.

**4.3. The criminal city as a chronotope of moral temptation**

London in Oliver Twist is divided into two kinds of space. One is the underworld, Fagin's den and the slum of Jacob's Island, with its dim light, narrow passages and half-ruined buildings; the other is the bourgeois domestic interior of Mr Brownlow's house. Welsh (1971) and Miller (1958) have shown that Dickens's city is both a real social space and a symbolic one. In the underworld, time is cyclical and secretive: night-time transactions, repeated lessons in theft, and an environment where nothing changes except the intensification of threat. Its effect on the hero is not the formation of a criminal personality but the repeated attempt to form one. This distinction is essential: the novel emphasises that the criminal environment tries to make Oliver "one of us," and that he resists, almost without needing to learn resistance.

In the context of the Newgate novel controversy (Hollingsworth, 1963), this is also a moral-polemical choice. Dickens refuses to romanticise criminality, and the narrative structure makes the criminal chronotope a space to be escaped from, not one in which a person can grow.

**4.4. The idyllic home as a chronotope of recovery**

The counter-chronotope is the domestic or idyllic space, first the Brownlow house and later the Maylie cottage in the countryside. Bakhtin describes the idyll as a world with a cyclical, natural time and a close tie to a limited space of family and landscape (Bakhtin, 1981, pp. 224–

236). Dickens's rural cottage fits this model: it is quiet, ordered, healing, and seemingly outside history. Here Oliver's emotional development is expressed through education, kindness and reading. Yet even this space is not entirely self-sufficient: the criminals follow him there, and the final resolution requires the revelation of his family origins.

**4.5. Recognition and the closure of biographical time**

The plot ends in recognition: Oliver's true parentage is discovered, his inheritance recovered, and the villains punished. Bakhtin associates such structures with the adventure novel, in which identity is a hidden fact that events eventually reveal. Because the hero's identity is already complete at the beginning, his "development" consists of passing through tests and being restored to his proper place, not of changing. In this sense Oliver Twist is a novel of disclosure and not of formation, a point consistent with the view that it is only a partial Bildungsroman (Buckley, 1974; Moretti, 1987). The chronotopes are therefore arranged as a series of ordeals (workhouse, road, criminal city) followed by a reward (home), and personality is represented as a moral constant, protected by providence and ultimately affirmed by social recognition.

**5. Shum bola: Chronotopes of Everyday Time and Communal Space**

**5.1. Double time: narrating and narrated**

The first and most important chronotopic feature of Shum bola is its first-person, retrospective narration. The adult narrator recalls his childhood, so that two time planes coexist: the time of the events (a boy's world of play, hunger, mischief and discovery) and the time of narration (the mature perspective of the writer). This double structure creates a distinctive relation between experience and evaluation. The child acts, the adult interprets with humour and affection, and the reader perceives a personality that is in the process of making itself. Bakhtin's remarks on autobiographical and biographical forms are relevant (Bakhtin, 1981, pp. 130–146): such texts depend on a self-conscious distance between the one who lives and the one who tells. In Oliver Twist this distance is occupied by an external, moralising narrator; in Shum bola it is occupied by the hero's own later self, which transforms the character from an object of narration into its subject.

**5.2. The street and the bazaar as chronotopes of social learning**

The public spaces of the city, streets, bazaar and open squares, are in Shum bola places of constant encounter. As in Bakhtin's road chronotope, meetings are central, but here they are not accidents of adventure time; they belong to everyday time, a time of routine, trade, bargaining and the repeating rhythms of urban life. The bazaar is a space where social roles, language and survival tactics are learned: how to speak, whom to trust, how to find food and work, how to joke one's way out of trouble. Bakhtin's analysis of the carnival-marketplace tradition in his work on Rabelais (not cited as a source for the present study but relevant for the broader tradition) suggests why humour is so closely tied to such public space: the marketplace is a zone of free contact and of laughter that unsettles hierarchies. In Shum bola, humour is more than a stylistic feature; it is a chronotopic consequence of the hero's environment and the main instrument of his personal development.

This stands in contrast with Dickens's criminal city. Both are places of survival for poor children, but in London the lessons are taught by a corrupt tutor with the purpose of exploiting the child, while in the Tashkent bazaar the child learns through open social interaction, observation

and wit. The hero's skills are formed by the setting rather than being resisted by his inherent goodness.

**5.3. The neighbourhood and household as chronotopes of communal belonging**

The mahalla, the traditional urban neighbourhood community, is an important social unit in Central Asian culture, in which neighbours share obligations, mutual observation and a strong sense of reputation. Its time is cyclical, shaped by seasons, religious festivals, family events and daily routines. In this respect it resembles Bakhtin's idyllic chronotope, but with a vital difference: it is not an escape from the harsh world but part of it. The hero's household and neighbourhood are poor and often insecure, yet they provide language, customs, moral sanctions and models of behaviour. In Oliver Twist, the idyll (Brownlow, Maylie) is outside the child's early life and arrives as a reward; in Shum bola the communal space is where the child's personality takes shape from the beginning.

This structural difference expresses distinct cultural assumptions. The Victorian novel imagines the family as a private, moral sanctuary that society's institutions have failed to provide for an orphan. The Uzbek text imagines community as the basic medium of identity: the person is shaped in relation to others, and personal character cannot be separated from collective life.

**5.4. Institutional thresholds: school, religion and the colonial city**

Like Dickens's workhouse, Shum bola includes institutional settings, such as traditional education and religious life, and these constitute threshold chronotopes where authority confronts the child. But their function differs. In Dickens the workhouse is a place that denies development; in Gafur Gulam, institutions are one source of rules among many that the hero must negotiate, resist or circumvent. The historical background of Turkestan under Russian rule, with its social contrasts between the old and new parts of the city, the pressures of war and economic hardship, makes the city itself a boundary space where different cultures, languages and systems of authority meet. The child's mischievousness, expressed in the very nickname that gives the book its title, is a way of surviving between these systems. In Bakhtinian terms, the boy's experience of threshold is repeated and every day, not a single dramatic moment of crisis, and so it contributes to a gradual process of growth.

**6. Comparative Discussion**

The analysis shows that the two novels organise space and time according to two different models of personality formation. The principal points of comparison are summarised in Table 1.

**Table 1. Comparative chronotopic structure of Oliver Twist and Shum bola**

| Aspect | Oliver Twist | Shum bola |
|---|---|---|
| Narrative perspective | Third-person, omniscient, moralising | First-person, retrospective, humorous |
| Dominant time | Adventure time with a biographical frame | Every day and cyclical time with double (narrating/narrated) time |
| Primary institution | Workhouse (enclosure, denial) | Neighborhood and household (belonging, rules) |
| Road/street | Road of chance and displacement | Street and bazaar of repeated social encounter |
| Urban space | Criminal city as temptation | Colonial city as a space of adaptation |

| Aspect | Oliver Twist | Shum bola |
|---|---|---|
| | to be resisted | and wit |
| Idyll | Home as external reward and recovery | Community as the continuing medium of formation |
| Model of personality | Innate, constant, tested | Developing, relational, self-fashioning |
| Resolution | Recognition of identity and restoration | Open-ended maturation; narrator's retrospective self-understanding |
| Role of humour | Satire directed at institutions | Source of survival and agency for the hero |

**6.1. Similarities**

Both novels depend on the contrast between a hostile public space and a protective private or communal space. In each, the hero is a child of poverty who must move through urban environments controlled by adults whose interests are not his own. Both texts use social critique: Dickens targets the New Poor Law and parish bureaucracy, and Gafur Gulam's narrative reflects the hardship and inequalities of the old order. Both also show that the child's moral qualities, sympathy, resilience and humanity, are tested in each space of action. In both the city is the principal arena in which personality is made visible.

**6.2. Differences**

The key difference concerns the relation between space-time and the self. In Oliver Twist, the chronotopes act upon a stable identity; they test it but do not modify it. The hero is shaped mainly by moral destiny, and the plot's resolution, with the discovery of his origin, confirms that he was always who he was. In Shum bola, the child's identity does not exist in advance of the experiences represented; it is produced by them. The wit, adaptability and social intelligence of the hero are results of the everyday chronotopes in which he lives.

A second difference lies in the narrative position. Dickens's narrator stands outside the hero and judges the world; Gafur Gulam's narrator is the hero in another time. This makes Shum bola closer to what Bakhtin calls the novel of becoming, in which the hero's growth is tied to the process of narration itself, though it lacks the full historical emergence which Bakhtin considered the highest form of the type (Bakhtin, 1986).

A third difference concerns the role of the community. The Dickensian orphan is socially isolated, and his salvation comes from individual benevolence (Brownlow, the Maylies). The hero of Shum bola is embedded in a dense network of social relations. The first model corresponds to the liberal-individualist conception of personality that dominated the nineteenth-century English novel; the second corresponds to a communal and dialogical understanding that is deeply rooted in Central Asian culture and is also compatible with Bakhtin's own dialogism, in which the self exists only in relation to others (Holquist, 2002).

**6.3. Implications for comparative literary studies**

Three broader implications follow. First, chronotope can function as a tertium comparationis, a neutral basis of comparison, for texts that lack direct historical or genetic links. The comparison here does not argue for influence but for typological parallels and divergences in the treatment of childhood. Second, the findings caution against treating Western models of the Bildungsroman as universal templates. If Oliver Twist is already an imperfect case in the English tradition, the Uzbek

text clearly requires its own descriptive categories, in which humour, community and retrospective narration play central roles. Third, the study suggests that the representation of childhood in literature is always a historical argument: each chronotopic organisation proposes an answer to the question of what a society owes to its children and how it understands their formation.

**6.4. Limitations**

The study is limited to two texts and a single theoretical framework. The reading of Shum bola would benefit from further integration of Uzbek-language criticism and cultural-historical research on Tashkent in the period depicted. A larger corpus including other Uzbek, Russian and English texts of childhood could test whether the typology proposed here applies more generally.

**7. Conclusion**

The comparative chronotopic analysis of Oliver Twist and Shum bola leads to the following conclusions.

1. In Oliver Twist the key chronotopes (workhouse, road, criminal city, idyllic home) are arranged as a sequence of ordeals and recovery. They test an innate and stable personality, and the plot ends with recognition and restoration of identity rather than with transformation.

2. In Shum bola the key chronotopes (street, bazaar, neighbourhood, institutional thresholds) belong largely to everyday and cyclical time. They form personality gradually, through repeated social interaction, and humour is the principal instrument by which the hero adapts and acts.

3. The double time of Shum bola's retrospective narration makes the hero both the object and subject of narrative, whereas Dickens's externally positioned narrator keeps the child as the object of moral and social judgement.

4. The two models of personality, providential-recognitive and social-dialogic, reflect different cultural conceptions of the individual and community, though both express a humanist protest against social conditions that damage childhood.

The chronotope thus proves to be a productive comparative category: it makes visible how literary form carries a theory of human development. Future research could extend the approach to other Dickensian novels (David Copperfield, Great Expectations) and to other works of Uzbek, Central Asian and Russian prose about childhood, and could combine chronotopic analysis with reception studies and translation studies.

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