

Narrative Temporality and the Power to Change in Kate Atkinson's *Life after Life*

Nader Mostafa Helmy

Assistant Professor, Faculty of Education,
Damanhour University, Egypt.

Abstract

Narrative temporality is "the physical coordinates of the location and extension of the event and of its narration on the continuum of time" (Steinby, L. "Time, Space, and Subjectivity in Gérard Genette's *Narrative Discourse*". 2016: p. 579). Based on Gerard Genette's model of time which stresses the two concepts of 'story time' and 'discourse time', the present study is an attempt to investigate Ursula Todd's self-realization of her power to change the course of her life in Kate Atkinson's *Life after Life* (2013). In his *Narrative Discourse* (1980), Genette maintains that story time and discourse time are distorted in their duration i.e. they

are not the same. Genette calls this sort of playing with time 'anisochrony' (86). Temporal elements to be considered in the novel include 'order', 'duration', 'frequency', and 'time and status of the narrating'. The Goodreads Choice 2013 winner, *Life After Life* follows the numerous lives of an Englishwoman trying to get her own life upright through featuring non-linear timeline and replication of scenes from different points of view. The reincarnation of the protagonist in the novel is a quite self-aware authorial intervention. Through the novel's temporal structure, Atkinson sharpens our awareness of what can be gained or lost when given the chance to experience one's life events more than once.

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Narrative temporality refers to the "study of the relationship between discourse time and story time in a narrative" (Ricoeur 167). The relation between time and narrative is not deniable as Jerome Bruner states that, "a narrative is an account of events taking place over time. It is irreducibly durative" (Bruner 6). Paul Ricoeur, a theorist of narrative temporality, writes, "narrativity and temporality are closely related. [...] I take temporality to be that structure of existence that reaches language in narrativity and narrativity to be the language structure that has temporality as its ultimate reference." (Ricoeur 165) Based mainly upon Gerard Genette's model of time in his *Narrative Discourse* (1983), the present study is an attempt to investigate Ursula Todd's self-realization of her power to change the course of her life in Kate Atkinson's *Life after Life* (2013). Genette divides his book into three main headings: 'tense', 'mood' and 'voice'. For the aim of the study, the analysis of Atkinson's novel will be restricted to the first part of Genette's book, 'tense'. By adopting Genette's model of time, the study will provide a critical analysis of the temporal aspects of *Life After Life*. The novel follows the numerous lives of Ursula Todd while trying to get her life upright through featuring a non-linear time structure and repetition of scenes and events from different points of view. A close examination of the novel's narrative temporality will reveal how Atkinson

sharpens the reader's awareness of the possibility of changing one's own destiny.

Time is an important component of narratology. Scheffel et al. define time from the perspective of the narrative theory as "a dimension of the narrated world (as conceived in the broader sense) and an analytical category ('tense') which describes the relation between different narrative tiers" (Scheffel et al. 1). Ricoeur in "Story time" points out that present, past and future, which reflect the human experience of time, is closely related to the narrative ability to reflect the same experience (Ricoeur 170). Martin Heidegger in *Poetry, Language, Thought* stresses that it is through narrative that "we are able to bring past experiences or future events into the present and make them part of present existence" (Heidegger 17). Heidegger, moreover, believes that the linear progression of time in a narrative does not represent the normal flow of time sequence in the human consciousness (Heidegger 25). This means time is comprehended as a single entity in which present, past and future are dynamically interconnected. Structuring and restructuring time sequence is, accordingly, an individual activity in which the ordering and reordering of events in a narrative varies from one person to another relying on the perspective through which he/she perceives the events and the characters and their motives. Such interconnectedness of the present, the past and the future is the

most significant feature of Atkinson's *Life after Life*.

Gerard Genette managed to collect the insights of preceding narratologists to create a typology that can apply to a wide range of narratives. Accordingly, Genette's *Narrative Discourse* is considered "the single most important contribution to structuralist narratology" (Steinby 581), for it provides a systematic analysis of a narrative. Genette divides his book into three main headings: 'tense', 'mood' and 'voice'. He then subdivides the 'tense' into three main components: 'order', 'duration' and 'frequency'. Gerard starts his book by defining a set of binary terms in order to introduce his narrative theory. He differentiates between story time (fabula) and discourse time (sjuzet), analepsis and prolepsis, heterodiegetic narrator and homodiegetic narrator and many other binary terms.

The main premise of Genette's narrative theory is based on the distinction between the story time and discourse time, which is very similar to the distinction between 'fabula' (story time) and 'sjuzet' (discourse time) as introduced by the Russian formalists. Story time refers to the actual duration of events in the story; it is the sequence of events and the length of time that passes in the story. Discourse time, on the other hand, covers the length of time that is taken up by the telling (or reading) of the story and the sequence of events as they are presented in the discourse. While the story time is the natural linear progression of time, the discourse time is the spatio-temporal reconstruction of that story by the writer (or the narrator). In other words, story time refers to "what" is being told whereas discourse time refers to "how" a story is being told. Thus, the same story can be

reconstructed in different ways by different writers. Genette calls this manipulation of story time and discourse time 'anisochrony' (Genette 84-88).

Order, Duration and Frequency

To deal with time systematically, Genette employs order, duration and frequency as the three main components of the narrative 'tense'. By 'order' Genette means the chronological sequence of events in the story in relation to the sequence in which they are presented in the text; Genette writes, "events occur in one order but are narrated in another" (Genette 11). Genette also coins the term "anachrony" to refer to the non-linear order of time events as compared to its natural chronological order. He further coins two binary terms to measure the progression of discourse time whether to shed light on past events "analepsis" or to foreshadow future events "prolepsis" (Genette 39). It is worth noting that Genette eliminates equivalent terms like 'flashback' and 'flashforward' for they are closely related to visual cinematic production, and 'retrospective' and 'anticipation' for they evoke "subjective phenomena" (Genette 40). For Genette, the terms "analepsis" and "prolepsis" give a more "neutral" objective analysis (Genette 41).

Closely related to the order of story time and discourse time is the role of the narrator. Genette makes a distinction between the 'heterodiegetic' narrator and the 'homodiegetic' narrator. While the former is outside the story and stands on a higher level (like the omniscient narrator), the latter is a character in the narrative (like first person narrator). If the homodiegetic narrator is the principal character of the story, the narration comes

to be called 'auto-diegetic' (Genette 245). As for the heterodiegetic narrator and his/her power over the temporality of the narrative, Shlomith Rimmon in his *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* registers a point of considerable weight:

The heterodiegetic narrator possesses all the temporal dimensions of the story (past, present, and future) at his disposal. This gives [him/her] the opportunity to move back and forth in time and results in a very complex time pattern in the novel; whereas the homodiegetic narrator is usually limited to the present of the story (Rimmon 48).

The second component of narrative tense is "duration" or "Anisochronies". Duration is "the relationship between the actual duration of the events and textual length" (Genette 87). In other words, duration refers to the relationship between the duration of the story (measured by units of time like hours, weeks, years and centuries) and the length of narrating these units in the discourse time (measured by the number of words, lines, paragraphs and pages). To provide an objective analysis of the relationship between the duration of the story time and the length of discourse time, Genette employs four types of duration (ellipsis, descriptive, summary and scene) to which Gerald Prince added a fifth "stretch", a technique which is very similar to the cinematic slow-motion (Prince 53). These five types of time are concerned with increasing and/or decreasing the speed of narration in relation to the actual time of the events in the story. For example, a writer can sum up a character's whole life in a couple of sentences, or he/she can write dozens of

pages to narrate two or three hours in the protagonist's life.

The first type of duration is "ellipsis", the one with the highest speed. Here the discourse time is zero and the story time may consist of hours, days, months or years. In other words, a part of the protagonist's life is left out either because it is unimportant or it is to create a cloud of uncertainty in the narrative. The opposite of ellipsis is "descriptive." It occurs when the discourse time is more than the story time. It is to suspend the main event in the story time to allow for a description of a place or a character, an elaboration of the situation, an analysis of a character's mind, ...etc. Between these two types, we have two other types of duration: summary and scene. In "summary", the length of the discourse time is less than the duration of the story time. For example, a character's journey to a certain place which may last for five days can be summarized in two sentences. Scene (or isochronic) is very similar to the theatrical performance in which the discourse time is equal to the story time. (Genette 90-98) Hence, dialogue is the representative of this last type because the time consumed in the story is the same as the time spent in reading the discourse (of course with slight differences according to each reader's speed of reading the text). Genette points out that these four types are not strictly separated within a narrative; rather they can be mutually used by the author in varying degrees. For example, a summary can include a dialogue (a scene) and vice versa (Genette 90). Hence, two types can simultaneously occur. When discussing these types in Atkinson's novel, the narrator's purpose of accelerating, decelerating, summarizing, or stretching events will be fully analyzed.

The last component of the narrative tense is "frequency". Genette contends that narrative frequency is his main contribution to the narrative temporality theories as nobody has discussed this component of time in detail before him:

What I call narrative frequency, that is, the relations of frequency (or, more simply, of repetition) between the narrative and the diegesis, up to this time has been very little studied by critics and theoreticians of the novel. It is nonetheless one of the main categories of narrative temporality (Genette 112).

In other words, 'frequency' refers to the relationship between the number of times an event happens in the story time and the number of times it is repeated in the discourse time. For example, in *Life after Life*, Ursula celebrated her sixteenth birthday "once" in the story time; however, this event was repeated three times in the discourse time, yet with slight variations.

According to Gerard Genette (1983); Shlomith Rimmon (1983); and Michael Toolan (2001), events can be narrated in the form of any of the following: singulative, repetitive or iterative. A narrative "may tell once what happened once [singulative], several times what happened once [repetitive], once what happened several times [iterative]" (Genette 114). In other words, in singulative narration, what happened once in the story is narrated once in the text, and this is the most common type of narrative frequency. In repetitive frequency, what happened once in the story is repeated several times in the text, and this is the

case with *Life after Life* as the reader witnesses a number of repetitions of the same event. In the iterative frequency, what happened several times in the story is narrated once in the text. An example of this is narrating a character while sleeping. Though the event is understood to be repeated everyday in the story, it is recounted once in the text. Genette assumes that these identical regular events when narrated in the story once or several times provoke in the reader's mind "a mental construction" that helps to realize the significance of such repetitions (Genette 117).

In Kate Atkinson's *Life after Life*, the significance of temporality in the novel is clear from the beginning as the reader is introduced to chapters whose subtitles are mere dates: "Be Ye Men of Valour: November 1930", "Snow: 11 February 1910", "A Lovely Day Tomorrow: September 1940, November 1940, August 1926", ...etc. The significance of these dates is recognized when understanding the discrepancy between the chronological order of the story time and the nonlinear movement of events of the discourse time (anachronies). In fact, Atkinson manipulates the story time and the discourse time of the novel by presenting a protagonist who was born and who died for eighteen times, each time with new insights about her life and death. In her numerous lives, Ursula Todd experiences similar situations but with different responses. The discourse time moves in a nonlinear fashion in the sense that one chapter introduces Ursula while living in England during WWII, the following chapter moves backward to WWI, another chapter depicts Ursula's life in Germany in the aftermath of WWII. Hence, the anachronies of the novel exhibit drastic

movements forward and backward in time and place. As mentioned in the theoretical part of the study, the heterodiegetic narrator has unlimited access to the characters' consciousness as well as to the temporal dimensions of the story: the present, the past and the future. Accordingly, the heterodiegetic narrator in the novel has the power not only to move backward and forward in time but also she has the power to devour and reincarnate a character in different spatio-temporal settings.

Chronologically, the story starts on February 11th, 1910 and ends in June 1967. Ursula has lived in a middle class English family with her father Hugh Todd, her mother Sylvie Todd, her sister Pamela (Pammy), her brothers Maurice, Edward (Teddy), and Jimmy, and her maid, Bridget. As the story witnesses time shifts, it also witnesses location shifts as the main action of the story takes place in the English countryside, London, and Germany. Most of the story, though, takes place at Ursula's family home, Fox Corner. The novel traces the development of Ursula in her numerous lives to register her various responses towards the same situations when given the chance to experience them for a second, a third or a fourth time.

In one version of her lives, Ursula gets married to an English man, Derek, who abuses her, and to a German husband, Jürgen Fuchs, who imprisons her in Germany during WWII. She also works as a warden in the Air Raid Precautions Department (ARPD) during WWII. In her life time, Ursula tries her best to save herself and her family members from certain deaths and crises. In several chapters she is introduced as a submissive woman who is vulnerable to man's

harassment and abuse; while in other chapters, she exhibits bravery to face danger and to stop impending disasters to herself, her family and the world. The novel is, therefore, full of issues about fate and free will, war, family, women and femininity, marriage, and marital abuse.

In terms of Genette's first component of model of time "order", Ursula's suicidal act at the beginning of the novel is objectively justified. The novel opens with Ursula entering a café in Germany in November 1930 where Hitler and his companions were sitting. Ursula pointed her father's gun at the Fuhrer, and then she "pulled the trigger. Darkness fell" (Atkinson 10). The reader realizes that Ursula commits a suicidal act immediately after she shoots Hitler; she was killed by Hitler's companions in the café, "around the table guns were jerked from holsters and pointed at her" (Atkinson 10). The reader is, accordingly, confused at that anomalous beginning of the story. Yet, by applying Genette's "anachronies", Ursula's suicidal act is justified by considering the motives behind this assassination.

By employing a nonlinear temporal narration, Atkinson simultaneously sets a part of the story in both England and Germany during WWII. The descriptions of those horrible days are deliberately depicted by creating an analogy between the impact of war on people in the two countries. In one of her lives, Ursula joins the ARPD to give hand to the victims of the Nazi raids. There, she daily experiences the agony and moans of the casualties of the war:

The war went on and on. Into that dreadfully cold winter, and then there was the awful

raid on the City at the end of the year. [...] The raids were more sporadic now. There had been bad raids in March and April and they seemed all the worse for their having had a bit of a breather from the bombs. (Atkinson 272- 278)

The impact of war on the German people is much worse. Ursula already left for Germany in 1933 to study. There she meets Jürgen Fuchs, a soldier in the German army. Imprisoned in Germany because of the WWII, Ursula and her daughter Frieda experience the miserable conditions of the war:

They had lived for months in the cellar, like rats. When the British were bombing by day and the Americans by night there was nothing else for it. [...] She had been caught with Frieda near the zoo in a daylight raid and had taken shelter in the Zoo Station flak tower – thousands of people crammed in, the air supply gauged by a candle. If the candle goes out, someone told her, everyone has to leave, out into the open even if a raid is in progress. Near to where they were crushed against a wall, a man and a woman as they were leaving they had to step over an old man who had died during the raid. It was the closest to hell that Ursula ever hoped to come (Atkinson 229).

The chapter preceding this chapter, however, recounts the happy life Ursula and Frieda lead in Germany in 1938.

Hence, when the events move forward to 1945's Germany and 1942's England, the reader is aware of the difference between the two periods. To further the complication of the situation, Ursula's brother, Teddy, is shot down while flying in his aeroplane over Germany, and it is said that he died; her mother Sylvie commits suicide as a result. Simultaneously, Ursula's German husband, Jürgen Fuchs, was killed in the war, and hence Ursula has to be the breadwinner to herself and her daughter Frieda. Unable to sustain her family in the starving Germany, Ursula gets some pills from the chemist to end her and her daughter's lives.

This distortion of time represented by prolepsis and analepsis invites the reader to consider that "one of the functions of narrative is to invent one time scheme in terms of another time scheme" (Genette 32). In other words, the anachronies (the nonlinear order of time events) as well as the reincarnation of Ursula in different spatio-temporal settings widen the scope through which the reader could grasp the atrocities of the war on the average people in the two camps of WWII: Allied and Axis powers represented by England and Germany respectively. Such awful circumstances resulting from the war when compared to the peaceful moments Ursula and her family enjoy before the war clarify the reasons for the decision Ursula makes at the beginning of the novel to kill Hitler.

Killing Hitler in 1930 is, therefore, a deliberate choice by Ursula to stop WWII, for she believes that if Hitler did not come to power, WWII would not have broken out. Ursula, accordingly, raises the "what-if hypothesis" to imagine the world without Hitler. In a conversation with her boyfriend Ralph, she wonders if "Hitler had died at birth, or if someone had

kidnapped him as a baby and brought him up, surely things would be different" (Atkinson 174). When Ralph answers negatively by affirming the point that he may have become the bloody Hitler even if he had been kidnapped, Ursula hypothesizes more violently by asking what if he had been killed while he was a baby. Appalled by her question, Ralph replies, "Could you do that? Could you kill a baby? With a gun? Or what if you had no gun, how about with your bare hands? In cold blood." (Atkinson 174) Believing in free will, Ursula firmly replies, "He's always been a politician. He was born a politician. He was born a baby, like everyone else. And this is what he has chosen to become." (Atkinson 174) Thus, Ursula is quite ready to kill that man if his killing "would save Teddy... Not just Teddy, of course, the rest of the world, too" (Atkinson 174). The power to change not only her destiny but also that of the world is highly manifested when someone decides to sacrifice himself/herself to save the world from evil dictators. However, Ursula could not have done this unless she had been empowered with the experience of the war. Throughout the book, the reader finds that in every life Ursula "acquires something. In every life she becomes more heroic. She is never ready for it until she has gone through the worst. So it is a case of two steps: one step forward and one step backward for all the time" (Laws). The idea of sacrificing oneself to save the world is intensified throughout the book to foster the potentiality of changing destiny, not only for oneself but also for a whole nation. Miss Woolf, Ursula's colleague in the Air Raid Precautions Department, stresses the same point:

"We cannot turn away, we must get on with our job and we must bear witness." What did that mean? Ursula wondered. "It means," Miss Woolf said, "that we must remember these people when we are safely in the future." "And if we are killed?" "Then others must remember us." (Atkinson 390)

The "What If" hypothesis upon which *Life after Life* is temporally structured is related to what Catherine Gallagher calls "counterfactual narratives" which imagine "a history in which certain large-scale crimes, catastrophes, or inequities are either averted or inverted" (19). The what if hypothesis is a form of historiography that attempts to answer "what if" questions known as counterfactuals. Niall Ferguson defines the term as "it is, at the very root, the idea of reflecting on what did not exist or happen, or what might have existed or happened, in order to understand what already existed or happened." (12) Atkinson repeatedly declared that she wanted to "write a novel about what would have happened if Hitler had been kidnapped as a baby." (Laws) In imagining a world without Hitler, *Life after Life* urges "hypothetical thinking and solicits our participation in the creation of alternative worlds where the counterparts of historical characters are said to make world-historical changes." (Gallagher 20) Atkinson, thus, urges peoples all over the world to consider their decisions carefully when choosing their leaders. If it happens that the presidential candidate or any other official shows signs of ego, narcissism, and/or paranoia, this is clear evidence for people not to elect them; otherwise they will have another Hitler.

Still with Genette's first component of narrative tense "order", the novel's narrative temporality gives the reader clues that though Ursula dies in chapter two due to umbilical suffocation, she is going to be reincarnated in the chapters to follow. This is achieved through the anachrony of the story in which Ursula appears in chapter one as a young woman who is pointing her gun at Hitler. Accordingly, chapter two and the following chapters are seen as examples of analepsis in the novel, for the story begins in chapter one while Ursula is in her thirties; whereas chapter one is foreshadowing (prolepsis) the reincarnation of Ursula in the following chapters, for she dies in chapter two but the reader has already been informed in chapter one that she kills Hitler while she is a mature woman. Therefore, "prolepses are not usually identified in the first reading, but the second or further readings may reveal them" (Genette 40).

The anachronies of *Life after Life* also help highlight issues of spousal abuse. In chapter twenty entitled "Like a Fox in a Hole: June 1932", Ursula gets married to Derek Oliphant, an English school teacher. Gradually, Ursula realizes that everything Derek told her about his aristocratic family and his heroic champions in tennis is just fake. When facing him with his lies, Derek shows his real personality: a harsh abusive husband. In one of his sadistic attitudes, he suspects Ursula's fidelity and beats her up. Fed up with his increasing aggressiveness, Ursula fled to Pamela, her sister. There, Derek finds her chatting and laughing with her brother Teddy. Having mistaken Teddy to be Ursula's secret lover, he beats her up to death:

'Is this him?' Derek asked Ursula. 'Is this the man

you're whoring around London with?' and without waiting for an answer he smashed her head on to the coffee table and she slid to the ground. [...] There was so much blood in her eyes that she could barely see. [...] The black bat was coming for her. She didn't want to go. The blackness edged around her. Easeful death. (Atkinson 150-151)

In chapter twenty four, entitled "The Land of Begin Again: August 1939", the events go forward in time to depict another incident of spousal abuse, this time in Germany. Ursula's husband Jürgen Fuchs keeps Ursula as a prisoner preventing her from visiting her family in England, "She wanted to go home. She wanted to go to Fox Corner. She had planned to go back in May but then Frieda had become sick." (Atkinson 227). Fuchs does not allow them to leave Germany, rather he hides their passports to assure they will stay in Germany when he enrolls in the army. Accordingly, by moving backward (in 1932) and forward (in 1939), Ursula is ultimately seen in the two places (England and Germany respectively) as a victim of spousal abuse. That is to say the anachronies of the novel are employed to universalize oppression against women in two different contexts.

Chapter eighteen is seen as another example of the role of analepsis in the novel. The whole chapter registers a flashback to Ursula's past. The chapter depicts Ursula while living in an apartment in her own. She calls back memories of the last thirty years: her mother's suicide, the loss of friends, and the atrocities of the war. In the midst of the abrupt shifts of

temporality in the discourse time, this chapter acts as a reminder to Ursula and the reader of what happened in these thirty years. The common thread of these past memories is the impact of war on Ursula and her relatives, friends and people:

The toll of the dead had been her business during the war, the endless stream of figures that represented the blitzed and the bombed passed across her desk to be collated and recorded. They had seemed overwhelming, but the greater figures – the six million dead, the fifty million dead, the numberless infinities of souls – were in a realm beyond comprehension (Atkinson 86).

Ursula also remembers the loss of her close friends during the Blitz:

Ursula still missed the old flat in Kensington that she had shared with Millie. They had been bombed out in the big raid of May '41. Ursula had thought of Bessie Smith singing like a fox without a hole but she had actually moved back in for a few weeks, living without a roof ((Atkinson 85).

Another victim of the war is Ursula's mother, Sylvie. On hearing that her son Teddy was shot down in the war, she cannot endure the matter and thus she commits suicide:

Sylvie had chosen death on VE Day. While other women were scratching together food for tea-parties and dancing in

the streets of Britain, Sylvie had lain down on the bed that had been Teddy's when he was a child and swallowed a bottle of sleeping pills. No note, but her intention and motivation were quite clear to the family that she left behind. There had been a horrible funeral tea for her at Fox Corner. Sylvie was another casualty of war, another statistic (Atkinson 85).

The analepsis employed in this chapter, thus, sharpens Ursula's mind about the destructiveness of the war and its terrible impact on the individuals. Reflecting on these memories gives Ursula more determination to continue on the same track she already adopted early in the novel: to fight tooth and nail to change her destiny by fighting back her oppressors.

The second component of Genette's model of time is duration. The four types of Genette's duration (ellipsis, description, summary and scene) are manifested in *Life after Life* with different degrees. In the discourse time of the novel, as discussed in the order section, the events move back and forth with slow and rapid speed. However, the degree of acceleration and deceleration in the discourse time varies according to the significance of the period in the protagonist's life. Ursula was born on February 11th 1910. This date is repeated twelve times in the discourse time, as will be explained in the next section (frequency). The period from 1910 till 1914 is totally omitted from the discourse time, thus we witness a case of ellipsis. The ellipsis of this period turns out to have a thematic function. The ellipsis of this period instills in the reader's

mind that Ursula is doomed to death, for the two dates (February 1910 and June 1914) introduced at the outset of the discourse time witness the death of Ursula, "death and decay were on her skin, in her hair, in her nostrils, her lungs, beneath her fingernails, all the time. They had become part of her." (Atkinson 235) Therefore, this period is omitted to intensify the likelihood of Ursula's death at different points in the novel.

Another instance of ellipsis takes place towards the end of the novel. The period between 1947 and 1967 is omitted from the discourse time; thus, twenty years of Ursula's life events are left out without narration. Such ellipsis is intended to create a space for the reader to guess what happened between 1947 to 1967. Did Ursula make it and survive for the first time all this long period? Or she was simply subject to the birth and death circles she was doomed to from the beginning of the novel. In fact, the answer is to be individually inferred by each reader.

In terms of Gerald Prince's "stretching" or Gerard Genette's "description", Atkinson slows down the speed of the events in the discourse time to prolong the description of Ursula's childbirth and death scenes. The reason behind this deceleration of the speed of the events is related to the title of the novel itself "life after life". In order to register a new reincarnation (or beginning) for the protagonist, Atkinson has to emphasize the significance of starting anew after each downfall (death) by decelerating the speed. This deceleration empowers the reader's speculation about the title. In fact, by decelerating the speed of the birth scenes and the death scenes, Atkinson creates a circular temporal structure in which the

reader fails to decide which one comes first: Ursula's birth or her death. Accordingly, "life after life" can also be called "death after death", for each birth is followed by death, and vice versa.

To further the implications of the motifs of birth and death in the novel, Atkinson employs the descriptive mode to underscore the facets of life and death in the novel. In other words, Atkinson prolongs the effect of those two occasions in the novel by describing the birth and death scenes in detail. In chapter two, the description of Ursula's death when she was just born arouses pity:

The cord's wrapped around her neck. Oh, Mary, Mother of God. She's been strangled, the poor wee thing. ... The little heart. A helpless little heart beating wildly. Stopped suddenly like a bird dropped from the sky. A single shot. Darkness fell. (Atkinson 13)

In the following chapter, Ursula is lucky as the doctor just comes in time and cuts off the umbilical cord; hence we have a descriptive mode of her survival:

She would have died from the cord around her neck. Ursula opened her milky eyes and seemed to fix her gaze on the weary snowdrop. Rock-a-bye baby, Sylvie crooned. How calm the house was. How deceptive that could be. One could lose everything in the blink of an eye, the slip of a foot. 'One must avoid dark thoughts at all costs,' she said to Ursula. (Atkinson 27)

The contrast between the first and second scenes is given in detail. However, on the two occasions, horror and pity dominate the two scenes, for Ursula dies on the first occasion, while she is about to die on the second one. Accordingly, Ursula's life is surrounded with either danger or sorrow, a fact that is elaborated throughout the novel. Following is another example of the descriptive mode through which Atkinson decelerates the discourse time to intensify the pity and horror one feels when seeing a person losing his/her own life:

The water was up to Ursula's armpits now and she started to cry and pull on Pamela's hand, trying to stop her from going any further. ... Within a heartbeat, it had crashed over both of them, tossing them around as lightly as though they were leaves. Ursula felt herself being pulled under, deeper and deeper, as if she were miles out to sea, not within sight of the shore. Her little legs bicycled beneath her, trying to find purchase on the sand. Her helpless little heart was beating wildly, a bird trapped in her chest. A thousand bees buzzed in the curled pearl of her ear. No breath. A drowning child, a bird dropped from the sky. Darkness fell. (Atkinson 25)

In the following chapter she is born again, and she survives. However, the drowning scene is repeated in chapter six, but this time Ursula is rescued by Mr. Winton, a fisherman:

A huge wave rose, curling above their heads, and came crashing over them, sending them down, down into the watery world. Sylvie was startled to look up from her book and see a man, a stranger, walking towards her along the sand with one of her girls tucked under each arm, as if he was carrying geese or chickens. The girls were sopping wet and tearful. 'Went out a bit too far,' the man said. 'But they'll be fine. (Atkinson 29)

Atkinson maintains this descriptive mode of the birth, death and rescue scenes till the end of the novel, each with the same tone of danger and sorrow. The message Atkinson conveys to the reader is clear for Ursula has to undergo tribulations and calamities to be strong enough to courageously secure a place to herself and her beloved ones in the maddening world. No matter how many times one fails, what really matters is that one resumes his/her journey after every downfall.

Other descriptive scenes in the novel are related to issues of motherhood. For example, Ursula's affection towards her little brother, Teddy, shows her maternal attitude although she hasn't married yet, "If Teddy ever cried when he was young, Ursula could never bear it. It seemed to open up a chasm inside, something deep and dreadful and full of sorrow. All she ever wanted was to make sure he never felt like crying again" (Atkinson 101). According to Genette's 'descriptive pause', the story time is interrupted to make room for the description of a static period like the descriptions of the state of mind (Genette 62). Hence, in the above quote,

which is an example of a descriptive pause in the novel, the heterodiegetic narrator suspends the story time to express the state of Ursula's mind regarding her maternal love for her little brother.

Another important type of duration in the novel is the scene. The scene is a consistent match between story time and discourse time (Genette 68). Atkinson in *Life after Life* employs this temporal aspect to charge man's speculative power about controlling and/or changing his/her destiny. Most of the scenes or conversations that take place between Ursula and her mother reflect feminist issues especially those relating to wifehood and motherhood. On one occasion, Ursula infuriates her mother by demanding to study modern languages in college rather than getting married; yet, her mother's response reflects patriarchal ideals

"University won't teach you how to be a wife and mother," Sylvie said.

"What if I don't want to be a wife and mother?"

Sylvie laughed. "Now you're just talking nonsense to provoke." (Atkinson 153)

Furthermore, Sylvie rebukes Ursula for being a rape victim

"And does Derek know you're not intact?" Sylvie asked. [...]

"Intact?" Ursula echoed, staring at Sylvie in the mirror. What did that mean, that she was flawed? Or broken?

"One's maidenhood," Sylvie said. [...] "For someone who is far from innocent you seem

remarkably naïve." (Atkinson 137)

This is one of the most horrible things Sylvie says in the book, making Ursula believe that she is less of a person because she is not a virgin, though this was due to a rape crime. In fact, Sylvie adheres to the rigid gender norm of that time which devaluated the woman seeing her less than a human being. Accordingly, Sylvie represents the prototype English mother who encourages her daughters to stick to the prescribed gender roles of women: a wife and a mother.

Sylvie's anti-feminist legacy has been passed to her sons as well. In a short conversation with her mom, Maurice, Ursula's elder brother, bursts in anger because Ursula does not respond appropriately to him while teaching her to play tennis, "I can't teach her—she's a girl!" (Atkinson 32). On another occasion, Maurice also mocks Ursula for not being able to learn shooting. However, at this point the reader realizes Maurice's foolishness as Ursula has already proved that girls can shoot very well when she shot Hitler at the beginning of the novel.

Consequently, the scene mode in the novel raises issues of feminism about the prescribed gender roles of women in England during that time. Ursula's mother and elder brother who represent patriarchal ideals raise awareness about the predicament of women and the urgent need to change this status quo. That is why the readers witness Ursula in the following chapters leading a life of her own without a male mate. Ursula, then, presents a radical feminist prototype whose ideals were earlier influenced by her radical patriarchal family members.

The most important scene in the novel is between Ursula and her psychiatrist Dr. Kellet who asks Ursula to draw something. Ursula draws a snake eating its tail. According to the Egyptian mythology, the serpent eating its tail symbolizes "the everlasting return or cyclicity. The 'Ouroboros' (the serpent eating itself symbol) was introduced into Western modern symbolism to represent something constantly re-creating itself. It also represents the infinite cycle of nature's endless creation and destruction, life, and death." (Wilkinson 57) Dr. Kellet explains the matter in the same way, "it's a snake with its tail in its mouth. [...] It's a symbol representing the circularity of the universe. Time is a construct, in reality everything flows, no past or present, only the now." (Atkinson 305). Dr. Kellet, therefore, epitomizes the temporality of the novel in his own words. *Life after Life* does not have a beginning, a middle and an end, just like the snake with its tail in its mouth. This circular movement of time reflects people's conception of time itself. We do not perceive time as a linear entity, rather time is circular in the sense that the present is perceived in the light of our past and formed by our aspirations and concerns about the future, "Ursula still harbored the feeling that some of her future was also behind her but she had learned not to voice such things" (Atkinson 111). In terms of déjà vu and hindsight, then, Ursula is moving between past, present and future. The interconnectedness and circularity of these time segments go hand in hand with the idea of the "second chance". In other words, a person can be given another chance to amend his/her ruined life. Herein lies the significance of the narrative temporality of the novel as Ursula's life moves in circles; each circle is linked to other circles till the moment we do not

know the beginning or the end of her life. The circularity of time means change, so Ursula has the power to change her fortune in her life by moving back and forth in time to have a comprehensive view of her entire life. Such a comprehensive view will ultimately lead her to take the right decisions.

The third component of Genette's model of time is "frequency". *Life after Life* provides both the protagonist and the reader with an insight about different contexts by presenting two or more temporal structures to the same situation. As mentioned before, *Life after Life* follows the numerous lives of Ursula Todd. This means she died and was reincarnated several times in the discourse time. Throughout the discourse time Ursula died eighteen times: she was shot while assassinating Hitler twice; she was strangled by her own umbilical cord twice; she drowned in the ocean once; she died when jumping or slipping from the roof of her house twice; she died when she caught the Spanish flu four times; she died of gas inhalation once; she was killed by her husband once; she died during German raids three times; she killed herself and her daughter once; and she died normally while sleeping once. For the purpose of the study, the following analysis will be mainly devoted to the repetitive frequency, which means to repeat several times in the discourse time what already happened once in the story time.

Following each death, Atkinson gives the reader another version of Ursula's life, with situations and events either identical, inverted, reordered, or slightly changed. The repetition of events in the novel is "a quite self-aware authorial intervention, though thankfully without explicit authorial intrusion" (Manley). Atkinson

once admitted that she liked "the idea of recreating the ambiance of the past" (Laws). The repetition of events in the novel is meant to give the heroine an insight about her previous rather inappropriate response, and thus another chance to act well in the second time. As Genette observes, "the same event can be told several times not only with stylistic variations, but also with variations in point of view" (Genette 115). These "variations in point of view" will ultimately lead to Ursula's awareness about her aptitude to change her destiny.

The reincarnation of Ursula in *Life after Life* is achieved either through the replication of her childbirth scene or simply through her depiction as a young girl or as a mature woman in the chapter that follows her death. The childbirth scene is repeated twelve times in the discourse time, yet with considerable variations. For example, in chapter two, Ursula was born but she dies as she is strangled with the umbilical cord; whereas in the following chapter she was born, and the doctor comes in time to cut off the umbilical cord, and thus she survives. In another scene, it is her mother who cuts off the umbilical cord, and so on. The repetitions of Ursula's childbirth resonates with the idea Genette suggests regarding narrative temporality where an "an event is not only capable of happening; it can also happen again, or be repeated" (Genette 119). Genette gives example of the sunrise, an event that is repeated daily. However, *Life after Life* does not repeat normal events like the sunrise or someone having a haircut; rather, it repeats impossible events on the story level, like one's death and birth. On the discourse level, however, *Life after Life* represents one's stream of consciousness which

allows for travelling back and forth in time. This gives Atkinson the power to reincarnate the heroine several times, each time with new insights about her predicament. Ursula's repetitive childbirth scene, like that of the repetitive sunrise scene, represents a new beginning not only to Ursula but also for those who find affinity with her.

Each repetition of events and situations shows Ursula to be more self-possessed, more responsible for her own life and her beloved ones. On the Armistice Day in England, for example, Ursula experiences this event five times but with different degrees. In the first experience, Bridget, the maid, goes to London to attend the celebrations but she catches the Spanish flu. When she comes back home, the infection spreads to Ursula and thus she dies. Enlightened with the first experience, Ursula tries several times to prevent Bridget from going to London. It takes her four times till she meets success. This means that she died three more times till she managed to protect herself and her family from catching the Spanish flu. This resonates with Ursula's mother's comment at the outset of the story that "practice makes perfect." (Atkinson 31) Consequently, the temporal aspect of the novel goes hand in hand with its thematic aspect: 'to what extent one has the power to change his/her destiny'. Herein lies the significance of the title of the paper as the researcher aims at highlighting the protagonist's persistent efforts to change the course of her life in the light of the narrative temporality employed in the novel. Thematically, the novel suggests two oppositional premises: first, "fate isn't in your hands" (Atkinson 39) as uttered by Ursula's mother; second, one can change his destiny as the epigraph in the novel

suggests "what if we had a chance to do it again and again, until we finally got it right?" (Atkinson 2) The temporality of the novel with its protagonist's reincarnation in different contexts following Genette's repetitive frequency of time allows for such speculations about destiny.

One more example of repetitive temporal structure is Ursula's 16th birthday. Ursula experiences this event twice in the novel. On the first occasion, she runs into her brother's friend, Howie, upstairs. Howie forcefully kisses and rapes her. As she gets pregnant, she is about to throw herself in front of a train, but she changes her mind and goes to her Aunt Izzie who helps her to have an abortion. On the second occasion, and on her 16th birthday again, she experiences the same situation, but this time with a different response: she pushes Howie and kicks him in the shins. Accordingly, she presents two versions of a teen girl: a vulnerable submissive girl in the first version of her life, and a brave determined one in the second version.

The more Ursula is given the chance to experience the same events again and again, the more she is decisive to fix things. As a result of her endless birth and rebirth occasions, Ursula "develops somewhat of a savior complex" (Prose). She feels like it is her destiny to save her relatives and, sometimes, the world, "she ends up paving the way for women in senior positions of the civil service" (Atkinson 287), for instance. Toward the end of the novel, Ursula comes to the recognition that she is the epitome of those marginalized women who are doubly victimized by their countries' suicidal policies in the world wars, and by their cultures which restrict women to the

prescribed roles that engender nasty gender discriminations. When she manages to prove to herself and to the people around her that she has the power to change her destiny, she eventually "knew what she was now. She was Ursula Beresford Todd and she was a witness" (Atkinson 313).

To conclude, Genette's model of time has proved to be valuable in analyzing the complex structure of Atkinson's *Life after Life*. By coining order, duration and frequency as the three main components of narrative tense when analyzing the relationship between the story time and discourse time in the novel, Genette's narrative theory follows "the mode of thinking of the natural sciences not only in its striving for accurate and exhaustively defined concepts and a logically irrefutable system of knowledge but also in its construction of the observed objects" (Steinby 601).

Though Genette's narrative theory seeks objectivity in its analysis of the temporal aspects in the novel, one should not neglect the point that time itself is subjective. Time is perceived differently by individuals as it is "a culturally constructed concept, and it varies as a result of historical evolutions (Scheffel et al. 3) or cultural changes. The subjectivity of time thus disrupts the uniformity of its direction:

Subjective time is the representation of time in the minds of the characters in the fabula. It is therefore an element of the fictive world, just as the characters themselves, but it is already subject to distortion and patterning. The characters (or

people) can be thought of as being subject to brute, shapeless temporality, but in fact they live their experience of time in a form much closer to an ordered narrative, with significant connections between the events of their lives, anticipations, memories and projects (Jose and Garcia).

By applying Genette's model of time to *Life after Life*, the paper has shown how Atkinson has violated the temporal conventions of the novel by repeating the events and reincarnating the protagonist in different temporal settings; yet each time with a new perspective. Atkinson has manipulated time in her distinctive and unique way through the continuous shifting, stretching, and breaking of the linear order of time. When reading *Life after Life*, the simple common sense that points out that time is irreversible and moves forward at a steady rate has been called into question. Atkinson instead "tried to break the sequence, to put things out of order, to work from the present back into the past, to dissolve linear time in the flux of memory and desire" (Richardson 607). In her *Life after Life*, Atkinson

articulates the same idea of the circularity of time, "The past seemed to leak into the present, as if there were a fault somewhere. Or was it the future spilling into the past? Either way it was nightmarish. The inside become the outside. Time was out of joint, that was for certain" (Atkinson 310-11).

Life After Life can be seen as a book with dozens of endings. The endlessness of the story, therefore, supports the idea of the circularity of time in which the present, the past and the future are an indivisible entity. Herein lies the significance of repeating events in the story as Ursula gains more and more experience when living the situation more than once. *Life after Life* is a call for all women to figure out how to find, preserve, and tell the stories of their lives, even if those lives are often frustrating and disappointing. In reality, we may experience traumatic situations more than once. The point is, however, how we respond in every time. Ursula realizes that her past tragic experience is common among girls and women. The repetitions of such excruciating experience throughout the story ultimately pose the question 'Do we have the power to change our destiny?' In the margins of the novel, one can discern the answer that 'Yes, we do.'

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