

The Depiction of Time and Space in the Works of Li Munyol



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ABSTRACT: Lee Mun-Yeol witnessed three major social and political events that left an indelible mark on the history of the Korean people in the twentieth century: brief freedom, civil war, and ideological division. These three periods also saw fundamental changes in literature, and the works produced acquired new features in form and content. Lee Mun-Yeol's work effectively deepened these changes by accurately describing the time and place of depiction, as well as artistically capturing the various issues of that era and their impact on the inner world of man.

KEYWORDS: apple and five soldiers, time-space, chronotope, soldiers, army, land, priest, civil war, occupation, official, garden.

Literary scholars consider Li Munyol's short story "The Apple and the Five Soldiers" as one of the closest examples of his style. In this work, time and space are conveyed not only directly but also through symbols and metaphors. The story depicts the protagonist's youth, his life in the army, and his relationship with his own past. Additionally, the narrative can be interpreted as an exploration of the contrast between virtue and the consequences of military life.

In this purpose-driven literary collection, the interplay between time and space holds significant importance. Through symbolic imagery, similarities, and contrasting forms, the author expresses his perspective on the crucial role of time in understanding human experience. The depiction of space and time in literature, as well as their influence on the protagonist's inner emotions, form a fundamental part of Li Munyol's literary exploration.

In "The Apple and the Five Soldiers", time and space remain in constant interaction, and their harmonious integration allows the author to illustrate transformation and personal growth in literature.

Li Munyol witnessed three major socio-political events that left an indelible mark on the history of the Korean people in the 20th century: a brief period of independence, civil war, and ideological division. During these three periods, significant transformations took place in various fields, including literature. The works created in these times changed both in form and content but did not completely sever their ties with national traditions.

Despite the military rule implemented in the country following ideological struggles, national literature continued to develop, most importantly reflecting the spirit of the times. It is well known that Korean literature, with its rich literary heritage, stands out from the literatures of other nations. A distinctive feature of Korean literature is the simultaneous presence of three religious-philosophical teachings in its works.

In the 1980s, Li Munyol, who was actively engaged in Korean storytelling, expressed his artistic intent through various symbols, psychological dreams, traditional imagery, and new details. "The Apple and the Five Soldiers" is one such work, created using symbolic representations and infused with the spirit of Buddhism.

The strong presence of Buddhist philosophy in the story is evident from the very first lines:

"You are a Buddhist monk. Your parents are the Sky and the Earth" [8].

Li Munyol's approach to the theme of Buddhism is unique and is noticeable in almost all of his stories. In "The Apple and the Five Soldiers", the author effectively employs supernatural situations and symbolic imagery to convey his ideological message. At first glance, this narrative also evokes memories of the stories of Kim Si-seup, who lived during the classical period. The thematic essence of Li Munyol's story unfolds through specific details such as the garden, the apple, and the appearance of the five soldiers' spirits before the protagonist's eyes.

Having grown up in a Buddhist monastery from the third day of his life, without even knowing the identity of his parents, the protagonist decided to return home at the age of twenty-seven. This decision was prompted by his conscription into the army. After serving in the military, the protagonist, who wished to live like an ordinary person, sought permission from the head monk to leave:

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"I do not know which demon has led you astray, but I will not stand in your way. However, the Earth (emphasizing 'mother'—our clarification, K.N.), which once rejected you, will not welcome you with open arms now. You may return whenever you wish. The monastery doors will always remain open to you" [8].

This was the first conversation between the protagonist and the head monk. The monk recalled a pious woman who had once abandoned the child at the monastery along with a small fertile plot of land and an additional offering. From that day on, the boy lived completely isolated from human life, in a monastery located a hundred *li*¹ away, high in the mountains, far from the outside world.

"...In any literary work, the creation of a character is primarily a means of expressing the writer's attitude toward people and life. At the same time, it is the author's aesthetic evaluation of life's events" [6].

Through the protagonist's character, Li Munyol reflects on his own childhood, drawing parallels between his worldview, personal beliefs, and the human experience.

The protagonist spent a long time contemplating the words of the head monk and hesitated to step into his new life. Having lived only three days in the village where he was born, he felt like he was not returning home but rather entering an unfamiliar place. He wondered whether his birth had been an accident or if some misfortune had surrounded it. Despite these doubts, he did not change his mind. He no longer wished to remain a monk devoted to Buddha, Dharma (law), and Sangha (the monastic community)². Instead, he set off for his birthplace, longing to live as an ordinary person.

The place he sought was the **estate** of an "official" family, situated at the village's edge near a river flowing along the mountainside. The estate's **garden and house** were surrounded by thick *akas*³ shrubs, which emitted a pleasant fragrance while their shadows carried an air of mystery. The vividly described setting prepares the reader for the "encounter" that the protagonist is about to experience.

As the literary scholar Mikhail Bakhtin insightfully noted:

*"...In literature, the chronotope of an encounter often serves a compositional or sometimes a plot-resolution function. The encounter motif—various types of meetings—is closely connected to the road chronotope ('the great road'). In the road chronotope, the unity of time and space is revealed in a distinct and expressive manner"*⁴

The protagonist's journey and the events awaiting him are introduced through this key moment—an encounter:

"When he reached the soldiers, his legs trembled violently. Unlike his indifferent comrades, who were chewing apples as they passed by, one soldier fixed his sharp gaze on him. Among the five soldiers, he was the youngest, with a calm face, but his penetrating eyes, filled with deep contemplation, set him apart" [1]

The author vividly portrays the encounter between the father and son through a dynamic depiction of events. To comprehend and interpret an incident that occurred twenty-seven years earlier (in time), he employs a unique stylistic approach. By illustrating the portraits of the soldiers encountered by the protagonist, he provides an objective evaluation of the events of that time.

At that moment, five soldiers, whose outdated uniforms were uncharacteristic for the military, caught the protagonist's attention. Their appearance was striking: helmets without camouflage covers, uniforms devoid of distinguishing insignia, tattered and patched clothes, and boots caked with dried mud. Their grease-stained, unwashed faces and tense muscles were even more pronounced. The depth of their pupils indicated their hunger, revealing that they had not eaten properly for a long time. Two of the soldiers had stuffed unripe apples inside their coats, while the other two absentmindedly patted their apple-filled trouser pockets. The fifth soldier, resembling a famished man, was biting into a raw apple.

While the portrait of the five soldiers precisely captures the human condition during the civil war, it also manifests the author's perception of the time. At this point, it is worth citing M. Sultanova's statement: *"Like other artistic and descriptive tools, the portrait has its place and function in a literary work. The space allocated for a portrait, its assigned role—everything must adhere to a certain logic and artistic principle. A portrait cannot stand alone, isolated from the work's overall direction. The writer determines its placement and purpose. If desired, the author may prioritize a portrait in shaping a character, or completely disregard it. This depends on the writer's style and inclination toward a particular artistic technique"* [6].

The soldier's portrait created by Li Munyol embodies the image of individuals from the civil war era. This is a significant discovery in military prose. The external features of young men from this era could not have been portrayed in a more precise manner. These young men, victims of war, faced death in this very form.

¹ *Li* – A Korean unit of length, approximately 0.4 kilometers.

² *Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha* – In Buddhist belief, this represents the sacred triad that every monk committed to monastic life must follow.

³ *Akas* – Acacia, a leguminous tree with white flowers.

⁴ *Chronotope* – A term derived from the Greek *chronos* (time) and *topos* (place). Introduced into literary studies by Mikhail Bakhtin in the 1930s, the chronotope is a universal poetic concept that integrates genre, composition, plot, and text structure within a unified space-time framework. Additionally, time serves as the fourth dimension beyond width, height, and depth, providing a generalizing measure.

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In the depiction of events connected to the protagonist's fate, time and space play a crucial role. Uzbek literary scholar A. Ulugov, in his article *"The Painter of Time and Space"*, dedicated to the study of Abdulla Qodiriy's novel *"Days Gone By"*, expresses the following thoughts: *"It is well known that 'time' refers to elements such as year, month, day, and night, while 'space' denotes places like houses, streets, palaces, and mansions"* [7].

The setting of the story's events is a remote village. Through artistic imagery, the narrative portrays the social life of the villagers, the complexities of their existence, the Japanese occupation, and the landscape of the civil war period. Li Munyol begins the plot of his story by depicting the village (space) and the historical events of that time:

"The village, bathed in the golden light of August, resembled a scene from a traditional painting. Although the loud chirping of cicadas echoed through the tree shadows, no other sound accompanied it, intensifying the surrounding silence" [6].

The author's mastery is evident in his depiction of the village as a setting. At first glance, the village appears peaceful, yet it has witnessed the "darkest, most tragic days" in Korean history, absorbing the deep scars of the civil war and concealing its impact on human fate beneath the shadows of its trees.

After describing the village (space), the narrative shifts to another location (a dwelling – as defined by A. Ulugov), portraying the protagonist's mother's house:

"The interior of the house was slightly more spacious than its exterior suggested. The windows were large and made of glass, and the house was built in the Japanese style. Although it was not an old house, the lack of maintenance over a long period made it appear worn. The wooden pillars and window frames had darkened, and patches of stains could be seen on the plastered walls. The floorboards of the veranda creaked loudly under the visitor's every step" [3].

Through the description of his mother's home, the author highlights that the protagonist's family was once among the wealthier households in the village. During the Japanese occupation, newly built Japanese-style houses were rare in the village, and the owners of such homes were highly respected. One of the protagonist's ancestors had even been among the eighteenth *podrang* [4]. As a result, the villagers referred to the family as "officials". They lived a peaceful life until the sudden outbreak of the civil war, which led to their downfall, dividing the family under opposing ideologies.

In the story, the protagonist, Baek Manso, meets his father on the road (space) leading to the village after twenty-seven years, while he encounters his mother in her house (space). At this point, the author introduces the "**fruit garden**" belonging to the "officials" estate. The meeting between a soldier and a young girl (the protagonist's mother) in this **fruit garden** becomes a crucial link in the chain of events in the narrative. Without understanding this chain, it is difficult to grasp the deeper meaning behind Manso's journey, the five soldiers he encounters, the mysterious *akas* shrubs, and the apple incident.

The repetition of key elements—the soldier's visit to the **fruit garden**, his untimely death, and the image of him chewing an apple in front of Manso—reinforces their symbolic importance. Initially skeptical of the soldiers he met at the village entrance, Manso begins to see them differently after his conversation with his mother. The repetition of moments such as the intense gaze of a scarred soldier (whose face bore a shell fragment) enhances the reader's engagement with the mysterious nature of the encounter. The author masterfully depicts this enigmatic meeting, leaving the reader with a fundamental question: Who were these soldiers?

This question troubles the protagonist as well:

"A cold sensation enveloped his entire body, and he slowed his steps. Overwhelmed by a sense of mystery and unease, he wondered: were these five soldiers deserters, or worse—criminals who had committed atrocities? The soldiers, however, paid him no attention and continued on their way. Two of them had stuffed unripe apples inside their coats, while the other two absentmindedly patted their apple-filled trouser pockets. The fifth soldier, resembling a famished man, was biting into a raw apple" [5].

Here, Li Munyol's connection to classical Korean prose can be observed. For instance, in the anonymously authored *"The Tale of Hong Gil Dong"*, which some literary scholars attribute to Heo Gyun, the protagonist's extraordinary birth is repeated **fifteen times** throughout the narrative.

"Such repetitions in the tale are a deliberate artistic technique, serving two main purposes: first, to engrain the most vivid and significant events of the protagonist's life in the reader's memory; and second, to draw attention to the hero's origins from the lower social class" [8].

The author reinforces the reader's anticipation of the upcoming events by repeating lines such as, *"Two of the soldiers had stuffed unripe apples inside their coats, while the other two absentmindedly patted their apple-filled trouser pockets. The fifth soldier, resembling a famished man, was biting into a raw apple"*.

As K. Khamroev puts it: *"Considering the first and last sentence of a story as an artistic module and relying on them during literary analysis is a justified approach. In the structure of a story, the first sentence sets the foundation for the artistic expression and ideas, while the last sentence gathers them into a cohesive whole, reinforcing the writer's artistic concept and delivering it in a harmonious manner to the reader's consciousness"* [2]

The writer links the development of events to the time period of the civil war, thus reflecting his aesthetic worldview regarding the issues of that era:

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"I cannot deny our kinship due to your unexpected visit and my sister's reaction to it. However, please, let all of this remain between us. Our family has lived here for over three hundred years. Everyone believes my sister was a virtuous maiden. Moreover, the events surrounding your birth—though you are not to blame—led to the deaths of my father and middle brother. Our family barely survived. Please understand my feelings: out of respect for my father and brother, I cannot accept you" [4].

Li Munyol skillfully intertwines depictions of the village, home, and space with the historical events of the civil war period. He does so by incorporating the memories of the young woman (mother) and one of the village elders. According to the mother's recollections, the "official's" family could not forgive the daughter for giving birth to an illegitimate child, as it went against their honor. The eldest son supported North Korean policies, while the middle son voluntarily joined the South Korean army, hoping that this would serve as a way to atone for his brother's transgression. However, he was killed in action. Meanwhile, the father endured prolonged interrogations, ultimately losing his health and passing away unexpectedly. The family blamed all of these misfortunes on the soldier who had once entered their home and his comrades.

In order to provide a clearer picture of the events that unfolded during that time, the author repeatedly references the five soldiers and the garden. Even the father's death is depicted symbolically, comparing him to a "rotten tree collapsing on a cold day". The mistress of the house took her ill daughter to the hospital and, upon returning to the "apple orchard" in May, passed away herself. The large garden (space) became home to the sick daughter and her youngest son, who had just turned fifteen, leaving them completely alone.

As Russian literary scholar M. Bakhtin emphasized, the artistic concept of time and space in any literary work reflects the symbolic image of the world. Time (chronology) is the fundamental element that shapes and sustains artistic movement. Every moving person and object within a given space and time carries metaphorical and symbolic significance. Time, segmented into different categories, serves as a literary and sensory concept through which the world is perceived. The distinction between "early" and "late", as well as the concept of time itself, is used to help readers grasp the world in a deeper, more profound way [7]

The author focuses on the influence of a new space—the mother's home—on the protagonist's emotional state. When his sick mother lay bedridden, barely conscious, Manso's condition is described as follows:

Manso, having bathed in the river, settled among the dense akas shrubs. He needed to think about everything, but where should he start to unravel the mystery? The history of his birth had become even more obscure than he had imagined, almost resembling a tragedy. At night, his curiosity grew stronger. He even considered escaping from this terrifying secret, but there was no turning back. Without fully understanding the mystery, his mental state would not allow him to take even a single step toward a new life [4]

Overwhelmed by heavy and incomprehensible emotions, the protagonist wandered into the garden surrounded by akas shrubs. There, he encountered the same soldiers again. On one hand, this deepened his curiosity, but on the other, a chilling fear overtook his entire body. As mentioned earlier, the following lines are repeated:

Two of the soldiers had stuffed unripe apples inside their coats, while the other two absentmindedly patted their apple-filled trouser pockets. The fifth soldier, resembling a famished man, was biting into a raw apple.

As Abdulla Ulugov noted: "...A person's imagination is set into motion by the time and space embedded in their memory. Every event is 'imprinted' in a person's memory through a specific time and place. When someone revisits that place, past events, buried deep in their subconscious, suddenly resurface and appear before their eyes. In that moment, the person compares their past to their present, questions themselves, and re-evaluates their life" [7]

In his artistic depiction of the civil war era, the writer employs spatial imagery to realistically convey historical events. One such significant location is the **Nakdong River**.

Historically, the Nakdong River has been a fertile water source, crucial for agriculture, particularly rice cultivation, and a key area for fishing. It has long been regarded as the "provider" of the people. However, during the Japanese occupation, control over the river was lost, and Japanese authorities established dominance around it. Folk songs and literary works have been dedicated to the Nakdong River, highlighting its historical and cultural significance. A notable example is **Cho Myunghui's** short story "Nakdonggang", which made a significant contribution to Korean prose in the 1920s. The writer begins his depiction of historical events through the story of the river, emphasizing its profound importance to the Korean people.

In front of the fruit garden surrounded by akas shrubs, the young soldiers sentenced to death were accused of abandoning the front line near the Nakdong River, stealing apples from a civilian orchard, and causing material damage. However, an elder also recalls that after the Nakdong River fell into the hands of the South Koreans, these young soldiers were actually executed by Northern officers dressed in South Korean military uniforms. Yet, since the elder had personally witnessed all these events, he expresses skepticism about the second account.

The story "The Apple and the Five Soldiers" is deeply rooted in historical facts. Because of this, the narrative frequently references events from the civil war era. The author's intent is to encourage the people not to draw one-sided conclusions from the tragic war events. This is illustrated through the elder's recollections, particularly his account of the five young soldiers who, despite being someone's children, lost their lives at such a tender age. Additionally, in shaping the characters of that war era, the story

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incorporates references to historical figures such as **Li Gwonmu**, the battle for the Nakdong River, and the severe measures taken against soldiers, all of which vividly depict the horrors of war.

Biographical information about the author reveals that his own family was torn apart due to this very war. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Li Munyol fearlessly presents the reality of the civil war, without attempting to soften its brutality. This sets him apart from other writers of his time, as he demonstrates remarkable courage in his portrayal.

Many writers before him also explored the theme of the civil war, each portraying the psychological state of their characters in different ways. In some works, the transformation of war-era characters is consistently depicted, while in others, it is presented in a more complex manner. In Li Munyol's story, the driving force behind the protagonist's actions and the development of the entire narrative structure is the civil war itself.

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