The Chronotope in John Updike’s Novel *The Centaur*

A thesis submitted
to Kent State University in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the
Degree of Master of Arts

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August , 2012
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Introduction

The complexities of narration formed by the shifting point of view, the multiple layers of the plot, and the juxtaposition of mythical and real have been the center of critics’ attention since the first publication of *The Centaur* (1963) by John Updike. In his essay “The Necessity of Myth in Updike’s *The Centaur,*** Edward P. Vargo mentions that initially critics expressed their concerns regarding the appropriation of myth in the novel, and accused the author of experimenting with the form for the sake of novelty (452). However, when critics do explore the function of mythology in *The Centaur*, they tend to focus on the characters’ struggling with the Christian vision of the world and with Peter Caldwell’s attempt to mythologize the image of his father, George Caldwell. The following analysis attempts at exploring the novel under study by means of Bakhtinian theory that helps to explain the presence of the mythological elements and religious undertones in the novel.

According to Bakhtin’s theory, each genre does not cease to develop throughout the course of history. Developing a new theoretical approach towards literature, Bakhtin paid special attention to the temporal and spatial relationships, which reveal themselves in the terminology appropriated by him. He introduced the concepts of “great time” and “small time,” which create an intricate fabric for the development of literature: “Small time (the present day, the recent past, and the foreseeable [desired] future) and great time – infinite and unfinalized dialogue in which no meaning dies” (Bakhtin, “Speech Genres”
169). This definition reveals Bakhtinian concepts of history and time in which the present always originates from the past. In compliance with his interpretation of the category of time in the process of literary progression, Bakhtin suggested that the concept of “genre” represents temporal relations and ensures the consistency of literary development. According to the theory, genre inhabits and survives time:

A genre is always the same and yet not the same, always old and new simultaneously. Genre is reborn and renewed at every new stage in the development of literature and the genre. Therefore even the archaic elements preserved in a genre are not dead but eternally alive; that is archaic elements are capable of renewing themselves. (“Problems” 106)

The abovementioned understanding of genre includes the notions of development and re-appropriation, which emphasize the dynamic character of a genre and its inevitable inheritance of its former manifestations. Clearly, genres do not maintain a pure, unchangeable form, but rather tend to intermix and produce new hybrid formations; however, the enclosing, assimilating structure still maintains a recognizable generic appearance. Consequently, in the context of Bakhtinian theory, the novel under study can be understood as a reappropriation of the generic canons and as a revival of archaic elements associated with the introduced myth in the text. While maintaining the inherited novelistic characteristics, *The Centaur* has to possess a certain degree of novelty as well.

While the following research focuses on the peculiarities of the text, it is worth explaining which characteristics form the core of the novelistic genre. According to Bakhtin, *heteroglossia*, i.e. the coexisting diversity of discourses, serves as an invariable
generic quality of a novel. In her article “Dialogism in the Novel and Bakhtin’s Theory of Culture,” Maria Shvetsova explains that “Bakhtin's conception of the novel is predicated on the idea that the novel is a specific speech genre, itself constituted by numerous speech genres;” moreover, since speech genres exist as an integral part of language “they cannot avoid being the essential structuring force of the novel” (750, 751). Bakhtin argues that the speech genres, formed by “relatively stable types of … utterances,” exist in the spheres of human activities that initiated them (Bakhtin, “Speech Genres” 60). Consequently, the existing modes of speech, the speech genres, constitute the building blocks of literary genres, including the novel. Bakhtin believed that novels reflect the existing “fundamental heteroglossia inherent in actual language” (“The Dialogic Imagination” 327). The diversity of appropriated discourses, i.e. heteroglossia, inevitably includes polarities and contradictions that determine the dialogical nature of the novel. Literary characters serve as the embodiment of the existing “languages;” they acquire specific beliefs while their languages form autonomous unities. Dialogism, associated with the phenomenon of heteroglossia, and the complexity of the novel as a genre are further reinforced by the peculiarities of the employed heteroglossia. Bakhtin argues that the novel “permits the incorporation of various genres, both artistic … and extra-artistic” and such newly introduced genres “usually preserve within the novel their own structural integrity and independence, as well as their own linguistic and stylistic peculiarities” (“The Dialogic Imagination” 320-321). Consequently, the mythological element as an isolated discourse becomes one of the sources of heteroglossia in the novel, the presence
of which is necessary for the novelistic genre. In the context of Bakhtinian theory, myth and reality inevitably engage in a dialogue.

Bakhtin’s idea of heteroglossia as the indicator of the novel emphasizes that a novel inevitably represents a dialogue between the linguistic components, points of view, and the imagery. The following research argues that, in the case of *The Centaur*, the dialogue which occurs between multiple chronotopes of the novel becomes the major peculiarity of the text. The complex relations between the realistic and the mythological parts of the novel come into existence within the limited space of the text and within the compound temporal and spatial dimensions of the fictional world. The following research employs Bakhtinian theory of the chronotope in order to explore the intricate structure of *The Centaur*. According to Bakhtin, chronotope, literally “time space,” is one of the crucial components of the generic development. The term describes the spatial-temporal relationships within literary texts. Bakhtin depicts the origination of the phenomenon in the following manner:

In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators fuse into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. This intersection of axes and fusion of indicators characterizes the artistic chronotope. (“The Dialogic Imagination” 84)

The spatial-temporal indicators constitute an important part of the chronotopic literary analysis. In the interdependent relationship of time and space in the chronotope, time
seems to take the dominating position; however, perception of time appears impossible in isolation from the spatial dimensions. Bakhtin claims that the chronotope ensures and protects the wholeness of the text; moreover, “the chronotope is the place where the knots of narrative are tied and untied” (“The Dialogic Imagination” 250). Thus, every part of the literary text is embedded in the intrinsic spatial-temporal relationship; the characters of the literary text and their actions are determined by the chronotope.

Providing examples of chronotopic literary analysis, Bakhtin focused mostly on the genre of the novel. In “Speech Genres and Other Late Essays,” he provides a short classification of the novelistic genre based on the ways the image of a protagonist is created. Bakhtin argues that “the principle for formulating the hero figure is related to the particular type of plot, to the particular conception of the world, and to a particular composition of a given novel” (“Speech Genres” 10). The interrelatedness of the abovementioned components becomes the focus of the chronotopic analysis. Since Bakhtin sees his research as a study in progress, his followers make attempts to further develop and explain the terms, which remain open to interpretation. In his attempt to clarify the concept of chronotope and its origin, Bernhard Scholz suggests that Bakhtin imagines two approaches towards the analysis of the literary chronotope, “from inside” and “from outside.” The former explores the characters’ perception of time, space, and their unfolding within the events; the latter attempts to analyze spatial-temporal relations from the outsider’s, i.e. the reader’s, point of view (Scholz 155). Scholz’s observation that the chronotope simultaneously projects the two radically different perceptions of the world highlights the complexity of the concept. Luis Alberto Brandão explains this
dualistic nature of the concept by the influence of Einstein’s Theory, from which Bakhtin possibly borrows and metaphorically re-appropriates the concept of relativity (134).

The critics admit the complex structure and composition of the novel; however, the attempt to explore spatial-temporal component of *The Centaur* appears to be a novel approach towards the text under study. In my research, I argue that the amalgamation of the mythical and the realistic results in a complex system of temporal and spatial markers. Following Bakhtinian literary theory and employing chronotopic analysis, I attempt to explain how the notion of time and space affect the development of the plot and assist in the portrayal of the main character. The research will focus on the spatial-temporal dimensions of the text in relation to the three dominant chronotopes: realistic, mythological, and religious. The interlacement of the abovementioned chronotopes provides the complex structure of the novelistic chronotope as a “concrete whole,” and explains the development of the plot (Bakhtin, “The Dialogic Imagination” 84). In the context of my research, the *realistic chronotope* will be defined as the chronotope of the protagonist’s everyday life, existing under the conditions of linear time and familiar, as opposed to alienating, fictional space. The realistic chronotope aims to plausibly imitate reality. The *mythological chronotope* is associated with the spatial-temporal characteristics of the Greek myth where time and space largely depend on the laws of chance and contingency. Besides, the mythological space includes agents and victims of fate. At last, the *religious chronotope* reflects the presence of God Almighty that controls the spatial-temporal relations in the world according to Christianity. A close examination of the abovementioned definitions reveals that all three chronotopes function as the media
of three separate discourses, thus, three sets of beliefs, according to Bakhtin. The dialogue between the dominant chronotopes becomes the embodiment of heteroglossia and the driving force of the plot development. Since George Caldwell, the protagonist of the novel, unites all three belief systems, his image becomes the cross point for the dominant chronotopes.

Chapter I of the following research focuses on the principles of interaction between the different spatial-temporal dimensions and on the development of the plot and leitmotifs in the text as a result of such interaction. Despite the fact that a novelistic chronotope is an intricate unity, it includes separate spatial-temporal markers as its constituents. However, leitmotifs of the novel seem to bring together the isolated markers revealing the presence of specific chronotopic dimensions. Chapter I will scrutinize leitmotifs existing in the novel that are closely associated with time and space: corporality, mortality, and supervision. Functioning as the organizational principles of the first chapter, the abovementioned motifs will serve as means of disclosure and description of the three dominant chronotopes of the novel. Since the announced leitmotifs depend on the spatial-temporal markers, they unite the dominant chronotopic dimensions, and reveal the competition between them, explaining the development of the plot. While Chapter I explores the major categories of the chronotope in the text, Chapter II and Chapter III focus on space and time respectively. The first chapter does not provide description or analysis of time and space as chronotopic constituents in the novel; it merely traces out the complex structure of the novelistic chronotope as a whole and defines the leitmotifs of the text that will be mentioned in the subsequent research. The
analysis, provided in the following two chapters, identifies the temporal and spatial dimensions of *The Centaur* in the context of the chronotopic components, described in Chapter I. The chronotopic analysis provided by Mikhail Bakhtin demonstrate that each chronotope may include different specific times and spaces as its building blocks. For example, ancient *adventure novels of everyday life* employed both *everyday time* and *adventure-time*. Similar processes can be found in the novel under study. Chapter II and III will explain in detail how exactly temporal and spatial dimensions of the novel are formed and revealed in the text. The analysis of the chronotopic components will explain the development of the plot, the architectonics of the novel based on predetermined closure, and the presence of the chronotopic components, inherited from the ancient genres.
Chapter I

Disclosure of the Dominant Chronotopes

1. The Leitmotif of Corporality

*The Centaur* (1963), a winner of the National Book Award in 1964, is the third of Updike’s novels, famous for “a careful recreation of an ancient Greek myth” in the setting of an American town in the 1940’s (Reilly, “An Interview” 218). The plot of the novel revolves around George Caldwell, a science teacher at Olinger High School, and his teenage son, Peter. The first chapter introduces the main character to the reader in an unusual situation; the teacher gets injured by a metal arrow shot by one of his students while he lectures about the genesis of the universe and the Theory of Evolution. After the accident, George Caldwell begins to feel a dull abdominal pain, which he interprets as a sign of cancer and, consequently, of an approaching death. After his friend Al Hummel helps George to extract the arrow, the protagonist returns to his classroom to finish the lecture. Unfortunately, his absence attracted the attention of the supervising principal Louis Zimmerman who seems to dislike the main character. George Caldwell believes that the principal wants to fire him. The following chapters describe the events of Monday through Wednesday while the last two chapters tell about Thursday morning. On Monday morning, George Caldwell and his son leave their farm to go to school and, on their way, they pick up a hitchhiker. Despite the fact that they might be late and the protagonist’s tardiness could inflict the undesirable anger of the supervising principal
upon him, he still drives several extra miles to help the hitchhiker. Later Caldwell visits Doc Appleton regarding his abdominal pain, and the doctor explains the symptoms as resulting from the strain a teaching career. As a coach of the school swim team, George Caldwell attends a swim meet in Alton where his team loses. After the event, the protagonist and his son plan to go home, but their car breaks down and they have to spend the night at a hotel. On Tuesday, George and Peter return to school and, after classes, they go to a basketball game. That night a snowstorm strikes, causing the newly-repaired Buick to get stuck on the way to the farm and preventing the protagonist from coming home for the second night in a row. The two characters are forced to spend the second night away from home, staying at the Hummels’ place. Due to the snowstorm, the school cancels classes on Wednesday and George and his son finally reunite with their family. The protagonist’s wife, Cassie, announces that Caldwell’s x-rays did not show any health issues. Since Peter displays the symptoms of a severe cold, he does not go to school on Thursday, but his father decides to continue teaching, despite the fact that the doctor recommended that George rest and even consider retiring from teaching. However, Caldwell is ready for death, literal or metaphorical, and Thursday morning he sets out to return to school, the source of stress and the catalyst of his death. Grown-up Peter, the narrator of the story, understands that his father’s exhausting career in teaching was a sacrifice made to better his future.

While the main storyline of *The Centaur* develops around George Caldwell, the protagonist of the novel, the reader comes across several instances of mythological elements throughout the text. Although the introduced episodes on the myth of Chiron the
Centaur do not directly relate to the plot of the novel, the author draws a parallel between the science teacher at Olinger High School and the mythological character. According to Josephine Preston Peabody’s *Old Greek Folk Stories Told Anew*, cited by the author at the beginning of the book, Chiron was a noble, immortal centaur; he was wounded by a poison arrow and, unable to bear the pain, traded his immortality for death as atonement for Prometheus who was daily punished for the crime of stealing fire from Olympus and sharing it with people. Interestingly, in his book *The Greek Myths*, Robert Graves mentions that possibly “Cheiron chose death not so much because of the pain he suffered as because he had grown weary of his long life” (126). Taking into consideration the variants of the myth, Updike creates George Caldwell, a modern counterpart of Chiron; he describes his main character as “a good man who at the same time was uproarious and complaining – sort of a noisy altruist” (Reilly, “A Conversation” 128). Familiarity with the myth allows the reader to see George Caldwell as a person that is capable of a sacrifice. However, the introduction of the mythological element has a deeper influence on the dynamics of the plot and the portrayal of the protagonist. Furthermore, the amalgamation of an authentic storyline and the ancient myth becomes possible only in the conditions of a compound chronotope, which inevitably includes mythological and realistic elements. Due to the intrusions of mythological elements, the chronotope of the novel appears unstable and distorted. The novelistic chronotope appears as a complex structure, encompassing evident realistic and mythological dimensions, but close examination also reveals the less obvious presence of the religious chronotope. The following analysis attempts to demonstrate that George Caldwell unites the multiple
chronotopic layers and functions as the focal point for both temporal and spatial
dimensions. The descriptions of the protagonist’s body allow the reader to notice how the
abovementioned chronotopic dimensions are stitched together. Exploration of the
leitmotif of corporality in the texts helps reveal the presence of the dominant chronotopes
and the way in which they interact with each other. Prior to the analysis of the temporal
and spatial components of the novelistic chronotope, I will examine the reoccurring
themes and motifs of the text in order to introduce the existing layers of the chronotope
and outline the chronotopic structure of the novel.

Corporality and the metamorphosis associated with it play an important role in
Greek mythology; the body can be simultaneously the source of a heroes’ power and the
reason for their vulnerability. When gods transform their body and take the form of a
certain animal to conceive children, their offspring’s appearance is usually affected by
the parent’s transformation. For instance, Zeus once became a swan and seduced Leda; as
a result of their affair, the woman laid an egg from which Helen of Troy was hatched
(Graves 62). Meanwhile, corporality in the world of heroes means vulnerability; the
ancient Greek heroes often face terrible, painful deaths being burnt alive or smashed in a
shipwreck. The myth about Chiron contains both of these mythological patterns: a
metamorphosis and a tragic death. According to different resources, the centaur’s father
was Cronus, or Kronos, who took the form of a horse before he seduced Philyra. As a
result, Chiron acquired the form of a centaur, half-man and half-horse; furthermore, being
the son of a powerful god, he was born immortal. When Heracles’ poisoned arrow
wounded the noble centaur, he could not cure himself despite his profound knowledge of
medicine; the injury became a source of unbearable affliction torturing the immortal Chiron.

Following traditions of Greek mythology, Updike pays special attention to the issues of corporality in The Centaur. George Caldwell’s body appears to be a spatial indicator of the mythological chronotope and a reminder of an approaching death. The epigraph contains a synopsis of the myth of Chiron, providing the reader with the keys necessary to understanding the novel. First, the readers learn that a poisoned arrow eventually brings death to the centaur, and then they find out that the novel’s protagonist, George Caldwell, gets a similar injury at the very beginning of the narrative. The fact that the novel is titled The Centaur and the characteristic wound suffered by both Chiron and Caldwell suggest that the protagonist will share certain similarities with the myth of the noble centaur. The protagonist’s body actively participates in the spatial-temporal relationships within the text, bringing the myth together with reality. In “Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel,” Bakhtin suggests that the characters’ bodies can function as a productive component of the chronotope; exploring Rabelais’ novels and the author’s artistic method, he demonstrates how “the human body becomes a measuring rod of the world” (“Forms of Time” 170-171). While Rabelais’ corporality aims at constructing a new picture of real, spatial-temporal world contemporary to the writer, Updike creates body images that function as direct markers for the intersection between several constituent chronotopes or for the shifts in the unstable novelistic chronotope as a whole.

The introduction of the mythological element into the novel means that the mythological time and space also enter the text. From the very beginning, the
mythological chronotope and the realistic chronotope make contact. When George Caldwell comes to Hummel’s garage to ask for help, his friend suggests a hypothesis that the arrow was poisoned. He sniffs the arrowhead after a successful “operation” on the teacher’s leg; however, George doubts that his students would go so far as to poison the arrow. The protagonist recollects several names of his students; at this moment, the mythological chronotope overcomes the chronotope of Caldwell’s everyday life and the teacher thinks of Achilles, Hercules, Jason, and Asclepios as if they are his students. Three of those names, excluding Hercules, will reappear later in Chapter III, devoted to Chiron’s lecture about Eros and the genesis of all things; they represent the centaur’s famous students. For a moment, Caldwell merges with Chiron. Ironically, the teacher names Hercules among the students who would not shoot a poisoned arrow at him; however, it was Heracles⁴ who did accidentally wound both his teacher and Caldwell’s mythological counterpart, Chiron.

The description of pain caused by the wound plays an important role in the leitmotif of corporality in the novel, and it opens the series of bodily images and descriptions in the text:

  Caldwell turned and as he turned his ankle received an arrow. … The pain scaled the slender core of his shin, whirled in the complexities of his knee, and, swollen broader, more thunderous, mounted into his bowels. … The pain extended a feeler into his head and unfolded its wet wings along the walls of his thorax, so that he felt, in the sudden scarlet blindness, to be himself a large bird waking from sleep. … The pain seemed to be
displacing with its own hairy segments his heart and lungs; as its grip swelled in his throat he felt he was holding his brain like a morsel on a platter high out of a hungry reach. (Updike 3-4)

In the abovementioned description, the reader follows the “itinerary” of the pain as it is moving through the protagonist’s body which seems integral. The reader does not question that the parts of the body, depicted in the scene, belong to a human, but the mythological chronotope has already distorted Caldwell’s reality, and the paragraph, following the description, reveals the duality of the main character: “[Caldwell’s] top half felt all afloat in a starry firmament of the ideals and young voices singing; the rest of his self was heavily sunk in a swamp where it must, eventually drown” (Updike 4). The juxtaposition of the upper and lower halves of the teacher’s body demonstrates the disconnection between his human and his mythological origins. George Caldwell’s lower body suddenly becomes heavy and hard to control because the mythological chronotope causes its transformation. The previous description of a seemingly human body is distorted by an unexpected detail - the main character has four legs: “[Caldwell] tried to keep that leg from touching the floor, but the jagged clatter of the three remaining hooves sounded so loud he was afraid one of the doors would snap open and another teacher emerge to bar his way” (Updike 4-5). In the form of a centaur, the main character maneuvers through the school; his lower body belongs to the mythological chronotope, while the space of the building tries to maintain the realistic chronotope. Analysis of Caldwell’s appearance helps to reinterpret the abovementioned scene of the spreading pain as a moment that has initiated his transformation; thus, the reader does not simply
observe a scene of spreading pain, but also the scene of Caldwell’s metamorphosis. The disconnection between the protagonist’s upper and lower body reveals the antagonism of consciousness and the body, mythological and real. When the teacher walks back to his classroom, he experiences the resistance of the space in the everyday chronotope while his lower body remains in the mythological chronotope: “The steps seemed built for the legs of a more supple species; [Caldwell’s] clumsiness was agonizing” (Updike 31). The description of George Caldwell’s legs becomes a fruitful means to demonstrate his otherworldliness. Multiple times throughout the novel, the narrator highlights how thin his limbs are, just as a horse’s legs seem too slim and weak for such a strong and massive carcass. Besides, the lower part of the body, including the legs, is the half that marks the difference between a man and a centaur.

To emphasize Caldwell’s dualistic nature, the author employs certain details that are associated with the animalistic world. On the level of unconscious bodily reactions, the protagonist reveals himself as a half-animal; for example, when he experiences fear before meeting the supervising principal, his skin “twitch[es]” (Updike 31). To describe Caldwell’s reaction, the narrator uses a phrase that is commonly used in reference to animals’ reflexes. Moreover, the narrator employs certain words as signifiers of Caldwell’s dualistic, partially animalistic nature. The word “horse” becomes one of those signifiers; the characters in the text often mention it when speaking to the main character. In Chapter II, the hitchhiker rudely responds to one of Caldwell’s comments using a less clichéd phrase “that’s horse poop” (Updike 88). When the main character becomes concerned with his physical condition, his wife recommends that he visit Doc Appleton.
In response, the teacher predicts that his friend will tell him that he is “as healthy as a dumb old horse” (Updike 116). In both cases the word “horse” alludes to the half-animalistic nature of Caldwell’s mythological counterpart, and, at the same time, the word belongs to the reality of an ordinary secular life.

The use of the word “horse” allows the narrator to bring together the realistic and mythological chronotopes. However, the image of an animal soon acquires a new connotation. After examining George’s body, the doctor comes to the conclusion that he exploits it too extensively. He explains his observation in the following terms when addressing Caldwell: “You see, George, … you believe in soul. You believe your body is like a horse you get up on and ride for a while and then get off. You ride your body too hard. You ride your body too hard” (Updike 129). The image of a horse reveals the third chronotopic component in the novel: the traditional Christian chronotope. The doctor’s remark partially illustrates the spatial-temporal relations that are characteristic of a religious chronotope which implies the existence of an afterlife in a “better world.” Animalistic references in the text demonstrate that the spatial-temporal relationships within the novel rest on the three chronotopes: the mythological chronotope, the realistic or everyday chronotope, and the religious chronotope. All three chronotopic components imply a specific perception of time and space, interplay of which will be analyzed later.

The realistic chronotope influences Caldwell’s perception of his body since in his childhood he was teased by his peers and had the nickname “Sticks.” The protagonist feels ashamed for his appearance and remarks to one of his friends that he does not want his son to inherit his “ugly body” (Updike 15). George Caldwell views his body as a
source of frustration and discomfort that can be explained by the fact that his body unites different layers of the chronotope. In the novel, the reader comes across two different explanations of why George Caldwell received the nickname “Sticks” in his childhood. Both hypotheses are introduced by Peter Caldwell, George’s son and the narrator of the novel. According to Peter’s Aunt Alma, the protagonist earned his nickname due to his habit of eating licorice sticks. Licorice is well-known for its pharmaceutical effects; the fact that the main character often ate candy with this herb’s extract possibly indicates that he did not exhibit strong health when he was a boy. The sickliness could be the source of Caldwell’s frustration associated with his body. In Chapter V, which is organized as an obituary, the reader encounters another explanation for the nickname. According to the narrator, George’s name “Sticks” appeared as “an allusion to an unusual physical thinness,” which could also be a sign of health issues. The obituary also reports that Caldwell’s early ambition was to become a “druggist.” On the level of the realistic chronotope, this fact contributes to the idea that the protagonist used to have health problems that encouraged him to consider medicine as his career. On the level of the mythological chronotope, the main character’s interest in herbs and medications alludes to his mythological counterpart, Chiron, who was known as a gifted doctor and taught the art of healing to Asclepius, the Greek god of medicine. This juxtaposition of the realistic and mythological chronotopes demonstrates that the main character’s body can be a source of affliction, but George has a potential, realized by the parallel mythological chronotope, to cure himself. Interestingly, the novel contains a famous Latin proverb “Physician, heal thyself,”⁶ that refers to Doc Appleton in the text. The proverb has strong
associations with Christianity since it appears in the New Testament, Gospel of Luke chapter 4:23. The ability to cure, in Christian tradition, is associated with wise prophets and The Messiah. Chiron and Jesus share the gift of healing and the willingness to sacrifice their lives to save others. Although the nature of their sacrifices is different, the religious chronotope reveals its presence in the abovementioned biblical reference. Caldwell’s desire to become a “druggist” in his childhood unites the three chronotopes of the novel.

As a teacher of General Science, George Caldwell is familiar with the scientific understanding of spatial-temporal dimensions, i.e. the relations of time and space in the universe explained in terms of contemporary Physics and Biology. The scientific explanation of time and space can be interpreted as a part of the realistic chronotope in the novel because science presumably describes time and space through the discovered laws underlying reality. It is worth noting that the image of George Caldwell’s body manages to incorporate the scientific part of the realistic chronotope, which is not available to the naked eye. However, appropriation of the astronomical, scientific time and space makes sense only in the context of the myth. In Chapter I, the narrator remarks: “Astronomy transfixed him [Caldwell]; at night sometimes when he lay down in bed exhausted he felt that his ebbing body was fantastically huge and contained in its darkness a billion stars” (Updike 38). These words can be interpreted as a description of the Milky Way that Caldwell earlier referred to in his lecture on the universe. According to his lecture, the center of the galaxy is located “in the direction of the constellation Sagittarius; that means ‘archer’” (Updike 37). In astronomy, the scientific exists next to
the mythological because a number of celestial objects borrow their names from Greek mythology. According to one of the myths, the constellation Sagittarius appeared when Chiron was placed by Zeus among the stars. Moreover, the epigraph of the novel cites this myth and the epilogue echoes it: “Zeus had loved his old friend [Chiron]; and lifted him up, and set him among the stars as the constellation Sagittarius” (Updike 299). Thus, when Caldwell feels that his body contains stars, he shifts to the mythological chronotope where he becomes an actual constellation on the sky dome in the mythological spatial dimension. Despite the fact that this particular instance of the symbolical corporality in the novel does not directly involve the religious chronotope and the dogmas of Christianity, Caldwell’s description of the Milky Way does incorporate the questions of spirituality. The teacher mentions that the galaxy used to be understood as the path by which souls reach Heaven. Such an explanation of the visible form of the galaxy suggests that people have souls and that there is another world existing beyond death. Similar postulates underlie the Christian religious chronotope. George Caldwell’s body again becomes the tryst for the different chronotopic components.

Caldwell’s body is not only a point of intersection between the three chronotopes of the novel, but, for the protagonist himself, it simultaneously serves as a symbol of human vulnerability and his inevitable mortality. The teacher treats his body as a potentially dangerous mechanism similar to a time bomb that is ready to explode any second. Moreover, George Caldwell tries to alienate his consciousness from his body. After examination of his patient, Doc Appleton tells the main character that the reason for his illness is that he has never come to terms with his own body, and George admits that
he hates it (Updike128). In the context of the realistic chronotope, these feelings can be explained by the protagonist’s childhood, which brings memories about his physical weakness and often illnesses. Furthermore, the main character knows that his father died when he was forty nine years old. This fact makes George Caldwell expect an early closure of his life. The level of his anxiety reaches its climax after he is injured by the arrow, since he is fifty and now his body can break down at any moment. In his conversation with Cassie, his wife, George utters prophetic words that his father-in-law should and will outlive him. Later in Chapter V, the obituary, the reader will learn that Caldwell is indeed survived by his relatives.

However, people do not believe in Caldwell’s prediction, ironically, because of his youthful appearance that exposes the signs of immortality imposed on him by the mythological chronotope. In Chapter II, Peter briefly describes his father’s appearance as follows: “He still had a full head of hair, barely touched by gray. Understand that to me my father seemed changeless. In fact he did look younger than his years” (Updike 64).This portrait gains its full meaning once placed in the context of the mythological chronotope. George Caldwell did not show signs of aging because aging means dying, but in the myth Chiron is immortal. The contradiction between the realistic chronotope and the mythological chronotope makes his existence torturous; in the Darwinian reality, he is doomed to die, while in the chronotope of the myth, he has to give up his immortality first. Consequently, death becomes a mysterious power in Caldwell’s life that has to be explored, but the interplay of the three chronotopes makes this task difficult, dangerous, and daunting. The motif of corporality, largely explored through the
image of the protagonist’s body, reveals the multiple layers of the chronotope, constructed in the novel, represented by the mythological, the realistic, and the religious chronotopes. The following analysis of the theme of mortality helps to further unearth the chronotopic structure of the novel.

2. The Leitmotif of Mortality

In one of his interviews, John Updike remarked that “in The Centaur, the real events are meant to be some kind of shadow of the myth” (Reilly, “A Conversation” 128). The composition of the text and interweaving of the mythological chronotope with the realistic chronotope determines the development of the plot. Incorporation of the myth about Chiron in The Centaur predetermines the death of the main character, which was often understood by critics as a metaphorical death. For instance, Susanne Uphaus interprets the novel as a story told by a singular narrator, Peter Caldwell. He tells the story of his father’s life while trying to create a heroic, mythologized image of his parent. Uphaus argues that “not only does Chiron die and George Caldwell go on to work in a world which is hostile to the spiritual vision, but, at the same time, Peter Caldwell bids farewell to that metaphoric vision which, he will later realize, makes art possible” (31). She suggests that only Chiron, George’s mythological counterpart and Peter’s interpretation of his father, does not survive at the end of the novel, while the main character continues his life. Moreover, John Updike supports the abovementioned interpretation in his earlier interviews stating that he “didn’t mean Caldwell to die in the Centaur; he dies in the sense of living, of going back to work, of being shelter for his son” (Samuels 27). However, the presence of Chapter V, organized as an obituary,
further complicates the question of Caldwell’s death. The chapter begins with the words “George W. Caldwell, teacher, 50,” providing both the name of the deceased and at what age he died. The narrator lets the reader know that the main character experiences the events of the novel at the age of fifty. Accepting the interpretation of the last scene as only Chiron’s death suggests that, according to the obituary, George still dies soon after the events of the novel in compliance with the plot of the incorporated myth about Chiron the centaur. The predetermined manner of the protagonist’s death can be interpreted as a necessary generic component of the novel, and it has to be analyzed in the context of the competing chronotopes of the text. The leitmotif of mortality, i.e. the reoccurring motif of death in the text, provides the context and serves as an excuse for a specific development of the plot in the novel with a predetermined closure.

Uniqueness of The Centaur reveals itself both in the development of the plot and in the predetermined ending of the novel. The reader, familiar with the myth about Chiron, expects a tragic closure, but does not know how the main character will arrive there. The predetermined nature of George Caldwell’s death builds up the tension of the plot and provokes the reader’s curiosity. The closure of the novel, the death of the main character, can also be understood as a reinterpretation of the generic traditions that has survived “the great time.” Bakhtinian theory emphasizes the ability of genre to renew itself throughout literary history. The notion of renewal plays an important role in the understanding of any genre. Bakhtin sees literature as an inseparable part of culture that evolves throughout the course of history. Criticizing the existing approaches of literary criticism, he spotlights the significant drawback they shared. Bakhtin uses Pushkin’s
A famous novel in verse to illustrate his understanding of a generic development that is often overlooked by the various schools of literary criticism: “Eugene Onegin was created during the course of seven years. But the way was being prepared for it and it was becoming possible throughout hundreds (or perhaps thousands) of years. Such great realities of literature as genres are completely underestimated” (Bakhtin, “Speech Genres” 140).

Bakhtin believed that the present appearance of any genre depends upon its previous history, i.e. upon the literary continuum of the “great time.” A predictable ending of a novel can be found as early as a Greek romance that was described by Bakhtin as the adventure novel of ordeal. At the end of the novel, the two young people who fell in love with each other at the very beginning of the story finally reunite and get married; adventures of the protagonists do not affect the happy ending of the story. Similarly, the events of the novel under study cannot alter the fate of George Caldwell; his death, metaphorical or literal, is inevitable. Consequently, the plot of the novel becomes an adventurous journey towards the predictable ending.

The novel does not give an unequivocal answer if the main character dies in all three dominant chronotopes. Most of the critics interpret the last chapter of the novel and its epilogue as a description of the metaphorical death. Analyzing two of Chiron’s death scenes, Jack Branscomb comes to the conclusion that throughout the novel George Caldwell avoids admitting his mortality, but at the end of Chapter VIII “the apparent imminence of death has forced him to accept his mortality. … Now he must accept more fully the pain of living” (64). According to the critic, the notion of a painful life occupies the foreground of The Centaur. While this interpretation of the theme of mortality can fit
the realistic chronotope to a certain degree, Branscomb does not consider the functional importance of the obituary, which would complicate his conclusion. In order to understand the predetermined nature of death in *The Centaur*, the reader has to recognize the nature of death in all three dominant chronotopes: the mythological chronotope, the realistic chronotope, and the religious chronotope. The competition between the dominant chronotopic components fully reveals itself in the leitmotif of mortality. Furthermore, the analysis of the abovementioned leitmotif helps to establish a connection between the dominant chronotopes and the plot of the novel under study.

The mythological chronotope appears to give the most accessible information about death and immortality in the novel because, on the level of myth, these notions are interpreted literally and within specific cause-effect relations. According to the myth, Chiron was born immortal, thus, he could not die even when seriously wounded. In ancient Greece, people believed in oracles’ fortune-telling, omens, and propitious signs; taking this fact into consideration, John Updike introduces the scene of an ominous black eagle’s flight in Chapter III. The fact that the eagle is a symbol of Zeus alludes to the idea that the people’s fate depends on the decisions of the gods and goddesses of Olympus; consequently, death does not originate from the fragility of a human body. Since death and eternity do not fully depend on the essence of a body, mythological beings have a chance to earn, or trade, both mortality and immortality. Oftentimes, mythological death means a metamorphosis that leads to a life in a new form. Sometimes after their death, victims of mischief, injustice, and tragic love were turned into objects of nature, such as trees and flowers, while the most worthy ones were placed in the sky as constellations.
Greek myths tend not to include deaths by natural causes; most of the mythological characters die under unusual, often disturbing circumstances. Similar to the alien world of Greek romance, the mythological chronotope is foreign to the characters because they do not control it and, thus, “can experience only random contingency” (Bakhtin, “The Dialogic Imagination” 101). Moreover, a tragic death, under unusual circumstances, becomes the token of the mythological chronotope controlled by fate and jealous, capricious gods. Chiron’s injury, causing unbearable pain, exemplifies the abovementioned chronotopic laws. However, the realistic chronotope of the novel complicates the interpretation of death on the level of Caldwell’s storyline.

Being Chiron’s counterpart, George inevitably brings the elements of the mythological chronotope into the real world. His perception of life as a tormenting, depressing experience is a reinterpretation of the centaur’s physical affliction. Furthermore, in compliance with both the laws of reality and the myth, the protagonist expects a malfunction of his body to be the reason for his imminent death. George Caldwell convinces himself that he has serious health problems and may even be diagnosed with cancer. He relies on the scientific explanations of death existing in the realistic chronotope; the human body gradually deteriorates from the instant it comes into existence. According to the realistic chronotope, mortality is a result of physical laws.

Giving a lecture on Darwinian Theory in Chapter I, Caldwell elaborates on the origin of mortality in the existing world:

Third …, the volvox, of these early citizens in the kingdom of life, interests us because he invented death. There is no reason intrinsic in the
plasmic substance why life should ever end. Amoebas never die … But
the volvox, a rolling sphere of flagellating algae organized into somatic
and reproductive cells … by pioneering this new idea of cooperation,
rolled life into the kingdom of certain – as opposed to accidental – death.
(Updike 41 -42)

In this passage, the protagonist compares accidental and certain deaths which correspond
to the mythological and the realistic chronotopes respectively. According to his lecture,
the complex organization of the body existing due to the altruistic cooperation of self-
sacrificing cells determines the finiteness of human life. His ideas emphasize that, in the
realistic chronotope, death is a result of very strict systemic laws in contrast to an
accident initiated by fate in the mythological chronotope. However, Caldwell also
suggests that each cell, acquiring a specific function within a group of cells, “enters a
compromised environment,” and “the strain eventually wears it out and kills it” (Updike
42). The suggested notion of an organized society of cells with prescribed functions
mirrors Caldwell’s understanding of his life and possible death. Literally, taking the
restricted role of a teacher in the compromised environment of Olinger High School,
George feels a tension that gradually destroys him. Life, in compliance with the
biological laws, inevitably ends with death; people cannot prevent the impending closure,
but they can postpone it by avoiding the strain. The obituary of Chapter V testifies that
George Caldwell, despite his knowledge about human mortality, did not try to change his
life in order to prolong it; psychological discomfort and numerous extracurricular
activities gradually exhaust his energy reserves. Later in the novel, in Chapter VI, the
protagonist explains a chemical reaction and uses the metaphor of energy to illustrate the notions of life and death: “Energy. That’s life. That little extra E is life. … [Without it] you become a worthless log of old chemicals” (Updike 187-188). Obviously, the realistic chronotope does not employ the notion of a mythological metamorphosis or a Christian afterlife; dying, bodies turn into a mass of chemicals. The continuation of life after death can only be realized through children who carry on their parents’ genes.

The given realistic interpretation of death excludes the notion of spiritual or literal immortality that can be found in the other two chronotopes. Consequently, Caldwell’s “realistic” idea of death inevitably becomes a source of exhausting psychological strain; moreover, in the realistic chronotope, the death of a parent directly affects his or her children’s lives. Just as an organism, a family depends on the existence of all of its members. When Peter thinks about the possible consequences of his father’s death, he realizes that he depends on George in all major aspects of his life: “My father provided; he gathered things to himself and let them fall upon the world; my clothes, my food, my luxurious hopes had fallen to me from him, and for the first time his death seemed, even at its immense stellar remove of impossibility, a grave and dreadful threat” (Updike 92-93). Later, in Chapter VII, Caldwell expresses concern for his son’s future because his death would rob Peter of the opportunity of a successful life. The protagonist insists that his child needs his guidance; George cannot “fade out before [Peter] has the clue” because he has to “keep him going” (Updike 223). Consequently, the teacher has to continue living under the strain of his work in order to provide a better future for his child. Critics often interpret the last scene of the novel as the metaphorical sacrificial
death of Chiron, while Caldwell’s sacrifice means maintaining the painful life of a “cell” in a compromised environment. However, according to the laws of the realistic chronotope, this choice also inevitably leads to the grave. The obituary supports the idea that Caldwell’s altruistic life eventually kills him and he fails to keep Peter “going.” Possibly, George’s early death explains his son’s failure in a painting career; grown-up Peter Caldwell calls himself a “second-rate abstract expressionist” (Updike 102-103). In the realistic chronotope, death becomes a powerful force that affects the lives of the people associated with the deceased.

Since the protagonist’s corporality becomes the cross point of the chronotopes in the novel, the question of mortality is also caught in between the spatial-temporal laws of the dominating chronotopic systems. The discussion of life and death in *The Centaur* would have been incomplete without the introduction of the religious chronotope into the text. Both the mythological and the realistic chronotope contain the idea of sacrifice; Chiron dies to save Prometheus while Caldwell lives to guarantee a better future for Peter. In Christian tradition the notion of sacrifice is closely related to the life of Jesus Christ. In one of his interviews, John Updike comments on the parallel between the teacher in his novel and the biblical image of The Messiah: “It is true that his [Chiron’s] life had become unbearable to him in a way that the life of Christ or any Christian martyr has not. In other words it became a convenient thing to do – it’s almost a thrifty thing to do, to give up a life that’s become sheer pain and at the same time bail somebody else out” (Campbell 96). This comparison illustrates that a sacrificial death has different reasoning behind it in the mythological and the religious chronotopes. Chiron agrees to
give up his immortality because of the unbearable pain he is doomed to experience eternally, while Jesus Christ deliberately chooses to suffer in order to give people an eternal life. Despite the fact that these two plots seem as opposite as the words “selfish” and “selfless,” they share one important component. Both scenarios appear possible only due to god’s mercy. In the myth, Zeus kindly agrees to forgive Prometheus, who stole fire from Olympus to share it with mortals and had to accept painful punishment that could last forever. When the Greek supreme god agrees to accept Chiron’s sacrifice, he shows mercy, both toward the centaur and toward the hero. In Christianity, Jesus is the medium of God’s infinite mercy, the concept of which George Caldwell cannot embrace. Sacrificial death – both in the mythological and in the religious chronotopes – is possible only under divine control. Since the realistic chronotope often tends to mimic the mythological chronotope within its own rules, Caldwell’s sacrifice and metaphorical death can happen only in presence of a powerful force that is represented by Zimmerman. Conveniently, his position as the supervising principal entitles him to control George Caldwell’s professional life, which is a sacrifice in itself due to the laws of the “compromised environment” in the realistic chronotope. The discussion of the leitmotif of mortality in the novel suggests that the interpretation of the novel heavily relies on the understanding of the specific chronotopic laws. The leitmotifs and the dominant chronotopes appear to be integral parts of each other; the motifs cannot exist outside of spatial-temporal relations, while the chronotopes cannot reveal themselves outside of the reoccurring themes in the novel. If George Caldwell’s body serves as an intersection of all three dominant chronotopes, his life and death depend on the laws of all three
abovementioned chronotopic components. Ironically, the competition between them becomes the actual source of strain in the protagonist’s life, and only his death can potentially resolve the conflict. While the leitmotif of corporality helps to identify the dominant chronotopes, the leitmotif of mortality unearths the competition between them due to the uniqueness of their interpretation of death as a temporal phenomenon. Meanwhile, the following motif of supervision, introduced by the religious chronotope, ensures uniting of the chronotopic components through shared spatial laws.

3. The Leitmotif of Supervision

The notion of mortality reveals a necessary presence of divine supervision or its equivalents in all three dominant chronotopes of the novel. However, its presence brings together the multiple layers of the spatial dimension in the novel. Prior to elaboration on the gods’ control as an intersection of the dominant chronotopes, I would want to comment on the word “supervision” itself. Developing the concept of “chronotope,” Bakhtin remarks that “language, as a treasure-house of images, is fundamentally chronotopic” (“The Dialogic Imagination” 251). The images that the language contains often reflect human understanding of the spatial-temporal organization of the world around them. The word “supervision” consists of two important parts, super- that means “above” and vision – “watching.” This composition of the word reflects the idea that control can be maintained by somebody who can see from above. Consequently, supervision is closely associated with space because it demonstrates that the supervising person takes a higher place in the chronotope in order to see those being supervised. The word “supervision” is of Latin origin, meaning that it most likely reflects a pre-Christian,
mythological perception of the world. Later the word is introduced into the English language by means of partial calque and gets a new spatial-temporal interpretation based on Christian understanding of the world. In both cases, the word successfully reflects the presence of one or more deities that closely watch human civilization. The feeling of being watched becomes one of the reoccurring motifs in the novel under study. In the mythological chronotope, Olympus, Greece’s highest mountain, serves as the home and “watchtower” for Greek gods. Consequently, the spatial marker becomes a symbol of divine control and superiority. Chiron as any other mythological figure knows that his life is under the gaze of Zeus. In the novel under study, Caldwell’s antagonist, Zimmerman, holds the position as the supervising principal of Olinger High School; by means of language, the author demonstrates the social position of the character and draws a parallel between Zeus and his counterpart in the realistic chronotope. Zimmerman’s position allows him to observe George Caldwell’s class at any time without prior notification. Similarly, the religious chronotope implies that God watches people from Heaven, the highest point in the chronotopic system. Interestingly, in Chapter VII, the sky associated with the religious notion of Heaven “becomes yet one more Bethlehem” (Updike 239). The narrator emphasizes the shift in the chronotope by mentioning that behind the window of the Hummels’ house, where Peter and George had to stay for a night, “the infant God squalls” (Updike 239). The sky, as a symbol of God’s presence, reveals itself in the religious chronotope. Both mythological and religious chronotopes suggest that people, while being watched, cannot observe the gods that live above them. This model of spatial-temporal organization means that people find themselves within a panopticon
where they have to control their behavior in order not to disappoint their supervisor(s).

George Caldwell has a similar experience that simultaneously reflects all three novelistic chronotopes. In Chapter I, before the protagonist meets Zimmerman, he has a “confused sense of having displeased, through ways he could not follow, the God who never rested from watching him” (Updike 31). The capitalized word ‘God’ implies the image of the Christian God Almighty; the presence of the definite article ‘the’ alludes to the existence of other – possibly mythological – gods. Besides, Caldwell articulates this phrase after he talks to Venus in the unstable mythological chronotope. Thus, the mythological and the religious chronotope merge in the context of the divine supervision. However, the protagonist soon remembers Zimmerman and worries that the supervising principal might have noticed his absence in the classroom. Later, the reader learns that Zimmerman closely watches Caldwell in his pedagogical career. Thus, ‘the God’ could easily refer to the figure of the supervising principal. Consequently, the concept of supervision in *The Centaur* includes the notion of Zeus’ disgrace, the Christian concept of human sinfulness, and the oppressive environment of Olinger High School.

The idea of supervision is reinforced by spatial markers on the level of the text itself. Several times throughout the novel, the text replaces the word ‘eyes’ with the following pictogram - ‘👀’. The text watches the readers while they follow the characters of the novel. The pictogram appears for the first time in Chapter I when George Caldwell goes to Al Hummel’s garage right after the accident with the arrow. The place had two cards promoting safety in the working area. One of the posters says, “PROTECT YOUR 👀 👀 YOU WON’T BE GIVEN ANOTHER PAIR” (Updike 10).
The card is placed over a window pane as a reminder of the beauty of the world outside of the garage. The position of the card also alludes to the idea that people are watched from above even through the garage window. The spatial location of the poster emphasizes the position of the supervising forces in the picture of the world in all three dominant chronotopes. The pictogram reappears later in the chapter when George Caldwell, giving a lecture on the genesis of the universe, has something thrown in his face by one of his students. The protagonist instantly remembers the advice he saw in Hummel’s garage and uses his arm as a shield to protect his eyes. The motif of corporality finds its representation in George’s need to maintain the integrity of his body which connects him to all the chronotopes of the novel. The narrator remarks that the teacher thanks God that his eyes have not been hit. In this situation, Caldwell seems to address the Christian God as if he is the one who saved George from getting another injury. In this dangerous situation, the protagonist seems to looks at the world through the prism of the religious chronotope. The third time the pictogram appears is in the concluding chapter of the novel, in which Chiron’s death is described. The three dominant chronotopes merge, and the suffering centaur replaces George Caldwell. Pondering over his fate, Chiron asks himself if he must “wander forever beneath the blank gaze of gods…?” (Updike 295). This time, the pictogram directly refers to the image of the mythological gods of Olympus. Nonetheless, later, the centaur uses the words “My Lord,” characteristic of Christian prayer, to address divine forces. This inconsistency denotes the fusion of the mythological and religious chronotopes. At the same time, the abovementioned phrase “blank gaze” can be interpreted as a symbol of
Chiron’s lack of hope for divine mercy. However, it may also describe the pictogram itself which means that the divine gaze is only a figment of imagination and it remains blank until humans prescribe it a certain meaning. The motif of supervision in the novel represents the unification of the dominant chronotopes, since they have to cooperate and share common ground in order to constitute the unity of the novelistic chronotope. While the leitmotif of corporality merely reveals the presence of the three constituent chronotopes, the leitmotif of mortality illustrates the antagonistic nature of their interaction. However, only the motif of supervision helps the reader view the chronotopic components as the force uniting the narrative rather than disintegrating it by means of competition.
Chapter II

Space as a Chronotopic Dimension in *The Centaur*

1. Micro Spatial Components

The complex structure of the novelistic chronotope in *The Centaur* requires a structural analysis of its components. The spatial chronotopic markers can be divided into two groups: micro and macro spatial components. The former include small scale, reoccurring, spatial elements that constitute a part of larger scenery; the latter include large scale, compound, spatial objects such as rooms, buildings, and towns. Separate spatial objects can be associated with one of the dominant chronotopes or serve as a crossing point for several chronotopes. Each micro component has its own function in the large scale panorama. Throughout the text, the reader comes across a number of reoccurring images that play an important role in the representation and interpretation of the novelistic space. The arrow is one of the most obvious symbols in the novel under study. In the context of the myth about Chiron, the arrow represents the sacrificial deaths of the centaur and the protagonist. When a steel-shafted arrow penetrated George Caldwell’s leg, it stitched together the mythological and the realistic chronotopes of the novel. The arrow serves as an indicator of the protagonist’s fate; however, the images of arrow-shaped objects that appear several times in the text reinterpret and enrich the symbolism behind the primitive weapon. Analysis of the context in which the arrow-shaped objects appear helps to identify the connotations of the image.
Since the novel is told by George Caldwell’s son, Peter, the additional meanings of the image reflect the child’s subjective perception of his father’s life. Once Peter learns that George may have serious health problems and once he realizes how much his family depends on his father’s career, he gets an opportunity to accompany Caldwell on his visit to Doc Appleton. The narrator remarks that his first visits to the doctor’s office are associated, in his mind, with a tendon hammer. Peter describes it as an object that reminded him of a sullen-orange, ancient arrowhead. In the child’s imagination, the object looked like a mysterious artifact of an unknown historical epoch; it represents time in its objectified form “with its infinitesimal cracks and roundnesses of use and age” (Updike 130). The hammer unites the historical, scientific chronotope and the mythological chronotope as a metaphor for historical time and as the means of foreshadowing Caldwell’s death. Peter also notices that the hammer looks not only like an arrowhead, but it also has the shape of a fulcrum. As he watched the hammer, it seemed to “sink down through time and to be at the bottom sufficiently simple and ponderous to make there a pivot for everything” (Updike 130). The arrowhead becomes an unstable basis for the whole world around Peter, creating the effect of balancing scales. On the one hand, the chronotopic image of instability reflects Peter’s feeling of uncertainty caused by George’s possible illness. Caldwell’s health endangers the stability of the lifestyle his family has maintained for fourteen years since the Depression and the beginning of George’s teaching career. However, the association with Themis’ scales of justice introduces the mythological connotations into the equation. According to Greek Myths by Robert Graves, the goddess, Themis, mothered Morai, or Three Fates, and had
a talent for prophecy; thus, her scales represent not only justice, but also unavoidable fate. The equilibrium of Peter’s life depends on his father’s life, the fulcrum of Peter’s existence. Moreover, the association between balance and the mythological goddess of fate reinforces the presentiment of Caldwell’s death and the influence of the mythological chronotope. As the preceding analysis demonstrates, interpretation of the special markers assists in identification of the chronotopic influence on the development of the plot. Spatially, Peter’s and George’s lives rest on the unstable fulcrum of death.

Another instance of arrow-shaped objects in the text can be found in Chapter VII when George meets Hester Appleton. In the realistic chronotope, she appears as a Latin and French teacher in Olinger High School, while in the mythological chronotope she has a counterpart, Artemis, the goddess of hunting. Since the bodies and the overall appearance of the characters serve as a crossing point for the dominant chronotopes, it is not surprising that Hester’s clothes become a key for the decoding of her image. According to the narrator’s description, the teacher wears a “gold clasp shaped like an arrow” (Updike 191). This arrow-shaped object reveals Hester’s connection to the mythological chronotope. Venerated as a goddess of hunting in ancient Greece, Artemis was usually portrayed carrying a bow and arrows. However, the symbol of a Greek deity acquires additional meaning in the context of Chiron’s storyline. According to the text of the novel, the centaur chose helping people as his goal and Apollo and Artemis promised to assist and guide him. Furthermore, in the realistic chronotope, Miss Appleton seems affectionate towards George Caldwell and, during one of their conversations, he admits that he should have married her instead of his wife Cassie. The invisible bond between
the protagonist and Hester reveals itself in the arrow-shaped clasp, which makes the reader think about the relationship between Artemis and Chiron. The goddess’s weapon becomes not only the means of hunting, but also the symbol of her protection of the protagonist, possibly due to her romantic feelings for the noble “centaur.” Artemis has to know that her father envies Chiron and watches him from Mount Olympus, thus, she should protect the centaur from the burden of divine supervision. Similarly, Ms. Appleton possibly watches after George Caldwell who has the supervising principle among his enemies. In this case, the arrow-shaped object indicates the nature of the relationship between the protagonist and the Latin teacher in the context of the dominant chronotopes.

Next time the narrator mentions an arrow-shaped object is when George Caldwell and his son spend a night at a hotel in Alton. Peter looks out of the window to contemplate the panorama of the city brightly illuminated in the lights of numerous electric signs. The narrator mentions that one of the signs was arrow-shaped, but he does not spend time thinking about the object he has discovered in the scenery. In this instance, the arrow demonstrates a particular direction in the space of the city, most likely indicating the location of a shop or a restaurant. In the context of Caldwell’s adventures on the road, the arrow also indicates the necessity to continue their journey towards home. While the importance of movement and the function of the road in the novel will be analyzed later, interpretation of the given arrow-shaped image suggests that it unites important directions of the storyline: fate, supervision, and movement. The deadly weapon connects the realistic and the mythological chronotopes on the level of metaphors and symbols. The deadly arrow acquires the role of a signifier in the text.
Similarly to the image of an arrow, a number of other micro components of the novelistic chronotope function as signifiers in the text. George Caldwell’s car, for instance, represents the fragility of the main character’s body. Once the protagonist begins to worry about his health, his vehicle begins to malfunction. The first time the car is mentioned in the text it refuses to start and the narrator notes that “the resurrection felt impossible” (Updike 71). The phrase contains religious connotations associated with the motif of immortality and the religious chronotope. The object gains anthropomorphic characteristics and is often referred to as a body. Continuing the motif of corporality in the novel, the car signifies mortality and an approaching closure due to the predetermined ending of Caldwell’s life and of the novel. In Chapter IV, George and Peter experience problems starting their Buick again. The motor of the car is described in terms of human anatomy and is compared to a human heart: “Twitched out of tune, the motor missed one, two beats, and died” (Updike 148). This incident foreshadows Caldwell’s death while emphasizing the importance of movement, i.e. progression in space, in the novel. The car loses its ability to move and deprives Caldwell of this “ability” too. The protagonist does not want to accept the fact that his car broke and when he talks to the service technicians in the garage he expresses his opinion that the car just needs some rest. Caldwell possibly identifies himself with the behavior of his Buick; he needs some time off, but he cannot afford it and he thinks his teaching career is slowly killing him. The specialists, however, explain that the motor of the car is not the reason for the problem, “it’s something in the body” (Updike 155). This scene brings the reader back to Caldwell’s concerns that the arrow that wounded him was poisoned and the toxin insensibly destroys George from
within. The protagonist believes that he is exposed to the poison of his students’ hatred on a daily basis; he wishes to quit his career, but his responsibility for his family and his students prevents him from retiring. Furthermore, the body as a source of the problems connects the realistic chronotope with the mythological chronotope. The car as a special marker encompasses the characteristics of the three dominant chronotopes.

Along with the car, Peter’s textbooks also seem to imitate certain characters in the novel. In Chapter II, the boy takes three books that will stay with him for the three-day adventure on the roads of Olinger and Alton. One of the textbooks Peter has is a “faded blue Latin, its covers all but unhinged” which alludes to Doc Appleton’s sister and one of George Caldwell’s supporters, Miss Hester Appleton (Updike 65). She teaches Latin and French in Peter’s school. As the analysis has shown, Hester functions as a protector of the protagonist; besides, she may be mutually in love with Caldwell. As with the cover of the book, Hester’s youth has faded but she remains balanced in George’s seemingly unsteady world. Another book is a red-covered, freshly issued Algebra. The reader knows from the narrator’s earlier description that Peter wears a red shirt during the three-day Odyssey back to the farm. The new textbook reflects the boy’s immaturity and a long path of self-discovery in front of him. The third book deserves special attention because it is devoted to George Caldwell’s subject, General Science. The narrator depicts it as a “weary grey book … with a triangular design of a dinosaur, an atom blazing like a star, and a microscope” on the cover (Updike 65). The book represents the protagonist of the novel and reflects George Caldwell’s weariness caused by fourteen years of teaching. As a spatial marker associated with the main character, the text book inevitably unites the
dominant chronotopes of the novel. Peter finds the names of the previous owners of the book and, among them, two names seem to be of particular significance: Mary and Rhea. In Christian tradition, the first name is strongly associated with Mary, Mother of God. The other name belongs to the mythological Titaness who was also known as the mother of gods since she gave birth to the future gods of Olympus. Consequently, the textbook indicates George Caldwell’s association with the mythological and the religious chronotopes in the novel while being a special marker in the realistic chronotope.

Micro components of the novelistic chronotope are like miniature brush strokes on the canvas of the narrative that create the depth and multiple layers of meaning. The comparison to painting seems especially appropriate because the narrator of the novel is an artist. Smaller, seemingly insignificant details in the text often convey intricate connections between the chronotope and the characters. While the abovementioned objects in the novel function as signifiers, others serve as a means of communication between the novelistic space and the characters. One of the most representative examples is the image a swear word written on the wall in Olinger High School. Caldwell notices the word on his way to Hummel’s Garage and it reflects his frustration about his injury. The inscription can also be interpreted as a deadly omen warning about the future challenges in the teacher’s life. As if understanding the meaning behind the word, George seems to expect that it would have disappeared while he was away, but on his way back to the classroom he discovers that the yellow wall still had the swear word on it. Consequently, Caldwell soon meets his first challenge – the visit from the hateful
supervising principal. The spatial signs of fate often appear in the mythological
chronotope and, as in the adventure chronotope, mean that the future cannot be changed.

A similar communicative micro component appears in Chapter III, when Chiron

gives a lecture to his students regarding the genesis of the world. Before the centaur
begins his lesson, his class traditionally sings a hymn to Zeus, asking the god to provide a
sign of benevolence. After they finish the song, a black eagle, the symbol of the supreme
god, appears in the sky; Chiron notices that the bird ascends on his students’ right and,
thus, serves as a “doubly propitious” sign (Updike 98). However, for the centaur, the
eagle becomes a deadly omen since it appears on his left. Later, the theme of death
reoccurs in Chiron’s lecture when he tells about the golden age of human history.

According to the myth, people used to live in the universe governed by Love and “death,
to them, was no more terrible than sleep;” however, now they live in a different world
that requires a different attitude towards death (Updike 99). The centaur’s lecture
explains the horror he experienced when he saw the black eagle: “Chiron feared for a
moment, then realized that though it was on his left, it was on the children’s right”
(Updike 98). The black eagle becomes the agent of fate that warns the centaur about the
approaching tragedy. At the same time, Chiron’s reaction to the ominous sign
demonstrates that he cares about his students’ lives more than about his own. Throughout
the novel, George Caldwell demonstrates a similar willingness to protect and selflessly
serve his students.

When in Chapter II Chiron sees the bird descending on his left, he understands
that fate sends him a warning of a danger that he cannot avoid. However, an ominous
sign, Caldwell receives from space in the realistic chronotope, not only warns the protagonist, but potentially gives him a chance to escape the tragic ending. At the end of the novel the protagonist comes across the same swear word in the lavatory but somebody changed it into the word ‘book.’ This metamorphosis of the ominous sign demonstrates that people can control their lives in the realistic chronotope and that George Caldwell “absorbs the fact, totally new to him, that every FUCK could be made into a BOOK” (Updike 247). The protagonist appears to be a confirmed fatalist who lives in accordance with the laws of the mythological chronotope. The space around him communicates an idea that he still has a chance to change the misery of his existence, but he decides to give in to the games of fate.

2. Macro Spatial Components

The functions of the macro components in the spatial dimension differ from those of the previously described micro elements. A description of the surrounding often acquires the role of a chronotopic qualifier that indicates what type of chronotope the character currently experiences in the given scene. Moreover, the spatial macro components help the reader identify certain characters with their mythological counterparts. Every time the text comes close to the myth, the language employs nature-related metaphors to mimic the myth-related landscapes. For example, the description of Hummel’s Garage and the way towards it replicates the spatial markers of the mythological chronotope. The narrator mentions that the garage adjoins the Olinger High School but a “little irregular river of asphalt” separates them. Later in the text, the narrator compares the asphalt to “a hardened volcanic flow” (Updike 6, 7). By means of
the imagery, the urban landscape transforms into a picturesque, intriguing panorama of nature. The fact that the garage is not the property of the school plays an important role in the interpretation of the garage and the school as spatial macro elements. The narrator describes the structure of the garage as a “grotto,” comparing it to an object of natural origin (Updike 7). Soon, the reader learns that Hummel limps and works as a mechanic and smith, demonstrating the major characteristics of the Greek god Hephaestus. According to *Greek Myths* by Robert Graves, the ugly smith-god lived in a grotto after his mother dropped him from Olympus. Thus, the spatial elements, along with his bodily characteristics, reveal that Hummel functions as a counterpart of the Greek god. Most importantly, the location of the garage demonstrates that Olinger High School, with Zimmerman/Zeus, should be understood as a realistic copy of Mount Olympus, the “watchtower” of the Olympian gods. Furthermore, the description of the uncomfortable stairs that Caldwell has to climb supposedly reflects the steepness of the mythological landform and inaccessibility of the place for an average person. In Hummel’s garage, the protagonist notices a one-eyed boy, an obvious reference to the mythic Cyclopes who were known as master-smiths. The space in and around the garage undoubtedly mimics the mythological space and facilitates the connection between the realistic and the mythological characters.

A similar effect of the interplay between myth and reality can be found in the scene when George Caldwell meets Vera, Hummel’s wife and a counterpart of Venus. Once the two characters recognize each other, the realistic chronotope collapses yielding to the mythological chronotope. In the course of several pages, George and Vera interact
as Chiron and Venus. According to Greek myths, the goddess of love appeared from the
sea; the myth explains Vera’s position as the girls’ physical education instructor and a
swimming coach at the Olinger High School. The first time George Caldwell meets
Hummel’s wife in the novel is when she has just gotten out of the school swimming pool.
The mythological chronotope dominates for a while, but the pool helps the reader to
understand that Venus represents Vera for a short period of time.

Another important function of the spatial macro components is to create a virtual
map of Caldwell’s world through which he navigates himself and his son. The notion of
movement represented by the road as a spatial component introduces a new spatial
dimension in the novel. The presence of the myth-based epigraph and epilogue suggests
that the end of the novel is predetermined; thus, the narrative vector of the novel reflects
Caldwell’s movement towards the tragic ending. The protagonist ponders over the notion
of travelling and moving to different locations as if a place of permanent residence means
potential danger. Furthermore, the progression in space implies a possible race against
time and death; thus, the notion of movement and travelling relates to the
abovementioned motif of corporality. At the same time, the road as a spatial component
becomes the reinterpretation of a mythological adventure. In Greek myths, the heroes
have to overcome a number of obstacles and challenges before they can reach the desired
destination or achieve a personal goal. Similarly, George Caldwell has to face different
challenges every time he tries to get to a particular place. Movement often means
dangerous encounters; as a result, on his way to the classroom after his visit to Hummel’s
Garage, George Caldwell meets a teacher named Medusa. The description of her
appearance and the unnatural stillness of the children suggest that she is a counterpart of Medusa Gorgona, one of the most dangerous monsters in Greek mythology. Caldwell avoids looking at her face as if he fears to become a stone statue. In this case, the movement through space serves as an indication of chronotopic interplay between myth and reality in the novel. Moreover, it puts George Caldwell in the position of a mythological hero that confronts a monster.

The next obstacle in George Caldwell’s journey is a hitchhiker whom the protagonist picks up on his way to school in Chapter III. The “Mythological Index” provided by the author at the end of the novel suggests that the hitchhiker is a counterpart of Hermes, Greek god and a patron of travelers and thieves. George Caldwell envies and venerates him because he has the guts to travel while, for the teacher, freedom of movement is a dream he will never realize. Because of the hitchhiker’s supposed need to go to Alton, the protagonist agrees to take an extra three-mile drive. During this unplanned trip, George tells the stranger about his dream to live in Florida because it would help Peter with his psoriasis. The teacher risks being late to work and attracting the attention of the supervising principal, but he cannot resist the temptation of a conversation about traveling. This scene reveals the dangerous and fulfilling characteristics of movement. On the one hand, spatial progression is associated with the fulfillment of dreams; on the other hand, movement in a wrong direction may result in punishment from the “supervising forces.” The scene with the hitchhiker also demonstrates how easily the protagonist can be distracted and how easily he can change the trajectory of his movement when he can face something he enjoys. This behavior can
be characterized as irrational in the context of Zimmerman’s attitude towards Caldwell; however, this “irrational move” simultaneously testifies that the protagonist’s work is a burden for him.

The third time George Caldwell’s journey is interrupted is when he meets a stranger after his Buick broke. The man is drunk and tries to extort money from the protagonist by accusing him of pedophilia. The stranger’s insulting comments make the teacher change his route again. The drunkard mentions several times that he knows George is taking Peter to a hotel. In response to an offensive accusation, George says that he enjoyed talking to the man who clarified his thinking. Consequently, the protagonist decides to go to a hotel to spend the night there. The next morning Peter feels that the new day’s air tasted differently; the narrator remarks that something has “moved closer” (Updike 168). Soon, George Caldwell learns that the manager who helped them get a hotel room without payment died over night. This detail suggests that, by staying at the hotel, the protagonist gave death a chance to catch up with him, but this time it missed and took a different person.

The movement becomes a vital necessity for the protagonist; however, on his way home he has to stay at Al Hummel’s house for another night. Caldwell’s three-day journey from home to school and back maintains the motif of mortality through both the actual death of the hotel manager and the spatial components. Several times throughout the novel, Peter and George pass or walk through a cemetery. The obstacles on the road and the car breaking down significantly slow the protagonist. Anticipating his close death, George goes to school and brings his books up to date. In his conversation with
Vera Hummel, the teacher explains that any new instructor would be able to take over his responsibilities if something happens to him: “For the first time since the last marking period everything is apple pie … If I don’t show up tomorrow, the new teacher can step right in and take over …” (Updike 278-279). The protagonist gives up; he does not want to be a part of the race any longer, but he fears that his son will not find his own path without the father’s guidance. Hitherto, the teacher has tried to move in order to guarantee a better future for his son. In Chapter VIII, Peter admits that he feels lost without his father beside him; soon he will have to figure out the trajectory of his life.

The image of the road in the novel symbolizes human life and, while George Caldwell’s journey may be over, his son will have to move on. In order to understand Peter’s future, the reader has to analyze a conversation between George and Peter regarding Venus. When the father and the son finally get an opportunity to drive home, Peter notices a star before them. He asks his father what star it is and George explains that it is Venus. Then, the boy wonders if it is possible to “steer by it,” and his father responds that he never tried (Updike 285). Taking into consideration that Venus is named after the goddess of love, Peter’s question can also imply whether a person could choose the direction of his or her life based on love. Earlier, George confessed that he should have married Hester Appleton, which means that he did not love his wife; the protagonist never tried to “steer” his life by love. Interestingly, the name Hester is the only name in the novel that does not start with the first letter of the name of the mythological counterpart. However, the name means “star” and suggests that Ms. Appleton could have been George Caldwell’s guide during his life journey. The protagonist tells Hester that he
married his wife because he was brought up so that “as soon as you saw a woman you half-way liked the only thing you could think of to do was ask her to marry you” (Updike 192). George did not have a chance to guide his life in accordance with his feelings, but he managed it following the norms he was familiar with. On the contrary, Peter seems to organize his life by orienting it towards love and passion. He lives with the person whom he calls “my love” and continues to believe that painting is his calling, but he remains lost without his guide, his father (Updike 265). The road as a macro spatial marker becomes an abbreviated version of George Caldwell’s life and serves as a background for the leitmotif of mortality. Movement becomes the symbol of approaching, inevitable, and inescapable death. Progression in space also involves guidance and guiding lines, but George Caldwell tries to navigate himself without following a particular “star,” metaphorically speaking. His behavior within space explains and illustrates why the approaching death is inevitable.
Chapter III

Time as a Chronotopic Dimension

1. Biographical Time

The second crucial component of the chronotope is the temporal dimension that plays an important role in the plot’s development. While spatial indicators seem obvious in the narrative, the notion of time is closely associated with space. Previous analysis proved the importance of the motives of mortality exposed through the notion of movement in the novel; the temporal markers serve to maintain those motifs while simultaneously making the imagery of the novel three-dimensional. Indicators of time interact with the novel’s plot on multiple levels. The presence of three different chronotopes in the text suggests that the characteristics of time may change in accordance with the chronotopic shifts, but the temporal dimension in The Centaur seems to follow its own logic. In his essay “Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel,” Bakhtin distinguishes four temporal categories in conjunction with the classification of the archaic novelistic genres: adventure-time, everyday-time, biographical time, and historical time. According to his theory, adventure-time does not happen in the mode of cyclicity, as a result the time of a novel employing adventure-time does not equal a sum of actions independent in time. The “ordeal,” constructing such time, do not aim to change the protagonists; on the contrary, they test the integrity of the characters’ identity. Thus, the characters do not age, do not change their beliefs, and maintain the same system of
values. *Everyday-time*, on the contrary, unfolds in cycles and inevitably affects the characters, allowing them to change and mature over the course of time. This form of time combines an exceptional moment of the character’s life into a sequence representing the hero’s evolution. *The biographical time* has several variations, but always focuses on the life of a particular persona. Bakhtin suggests that *the biographical time* inevitably interacts with *the historical time*, partly deriving its realistic nature from their interplay. However, Mikhail Bakhtin claims the biographical novel does not experience the true wholeness of *the historical time*, but the “embryonically historical time” (Bakhtin, “Speech Genres” 18). The last category, *the historical time*, focuses on the dynamics within a given society at a given historical moment. Although the novel under study employs all four temporal variations, the historical time appears to be of minor significance for the development of the plot. As a result, the following analysis will explore only three temporal variations, as suggested by Mikhail Bakhtin: “adventuristic,” everyday, and biographical, or, to be more precise, a Plutarchan variant of biographical time employed in the “energetic” type of biography. According to Bakhtin, time in the ancient philosopher’s biography is specific; it simply “discloses” the character in the context of historical time, but it does not portray the character’s growth since the “essence of character is outside time” (Bakhtin, “The Dialogic Imagination” 141). The following analysis will demonstrate the interplay of the different variants of the chronotopic time with the spatial markers in *The Centaur*.

The structure of the temporal dimension in the novel has two levels: Peter’s present and George Caldwell’s past. In his interview with Charlie Reilly, John Updike
characterized his third novel, the subject of the current research, as a narrative set “in the remembered past” (144). The reader does not experience the presence of grown-up Peter’s life until Chapter VIII, in which he openly addresses his black mistress. The reader finds out that the novel is not told by a teenager, but by a mature person who tries to rationalize his memories about his father. However, the episodic presence of the omniscient narrator and the temporal focalization of Caldwell’s point of view create the atmosphere of a documentary. The novel becomes a specific biographical narrative interrupted by myth. The presence of several points of view can partially explain the shifts in chronotope and multiple layers of spatial-temporal markers. The peculiarity of the fictional biography is an unusually short span of time covered in the text; the described events happened within a three-day period. As introduced in Chapter V, the obituary fills in the gaps in the protagonist’s life, providing the biographical details previously unknown to the reader. The casual introduction of significant milestones in George Caldwell’s life proves that the focus of the biography is the protagonist’s persona that appears independent from the environmental factors. The absence of obvious cause-effect relations between the teacher’s life and his fatalistic altruism can be explained by the close association of the novel with Greek mythology. Since the events of the novel reflect the myth of Chiron, the essence of Caldwell’s character exists outside the realistic, biographical time. In order to demonstrate the protagonist’s personality within three days, the biographical time thickens; the number of challenges exceeds the average in order to fully uncover the protagonist’s character. Updike once remarked that time in *The Centaur* has some distortion because he had to “compress a lot of boyhood memories into just
three days” (Dispenza 107). The condensed nature of time in the novel demonstrates that
the portrait of George Caldwell is detailed to its possible maximum in the given type of
narrative, but a certain distortion of the narrative is inevitable. To illustrate the effect of
the condensed time, the narrator provides its “trial version” in Chapter I, when the
protagonist has to explain the Big Bang Theory and the Darwinian Theory of Evolution
within a limited period of time. Time plays an important role in both abovementioned
theories and the teacher decides to translate five billion years of Earth’s history into a
comprehensible three-day process. Naming precise temporal markers such as “up until
now,” “at seven thirty,” “one minute ago,” Caldwell compresses the Paleozoic and
Mesozoic Eras and guides his class towards the historical moment when humans
appeared (Updike 41-43). This act of “verbal” time compression seems to affect the
realistic chronotope around the main character. Before George can announce that “one
minute ago, flint-chipping, fire-kindling, death-foreseeing, a tragic animal
appeared…called Man,” the classroom seems to remain caught in the pre-human
historical chronotope (Updike 46). Inexplicably, a boy takes out a paper bag full of
extinct marine animals, trilobites. The thickening historical time overthrows the
everyday-time, turning a girl into “a huge purple parrot feathered with mud” who picked
up one of the trilobites, “crunched it in her painted beak and methodically chewed”
(Updike 43). After Caldwell announces that an hour ago “our faithful friends the
mammals took over the Earth” and is about to announce the appearance of humans as a
species, the pre-historical chaos in the classroom turns in the mythological chronotope
where sexually aroused half-animals and half-humans interrupt the flow of the lecture
The description of Diefendorf’s (one of the student’s) behavior and appearance corresponds to the description of mythical centaurs, known for lust and beastly manners: “The girl’s mussed skirt was up around her waist. She was bent face down over the desk and Diefendorf’s hooves shuffled in agitation in the narrow aisle. From his sleepy careful grin he was covering her; the whole room smelled like a stable: Caldwell saw red” (Updike 45-46). The words “hooves” and “stable” allude to the horse part of the centaurs, while the word “grin” symbolizes the human part of the mythical creature. Diefendorf’s body as spatial components indicates the changes in Caldwell’s perception of the chronotope at the end of Chapter I. Despite their partial human appearance, the centaurs were seen as uncultured, brutal, lustful beasts; accordingly, George Caldwell treats his student as a disobedient animal: “[Caldwell] picked the shining arrow-shaft from the top of his desk, strode forward through the sickening confusion of books being shut, and once, twice, whipped, whipped the bastard beast’s bare back” (Updike 46). The bare torso of the student alludes to the centaur’s appearance and indicates the domination of the mythological chronotope over the realistic chronotope. At the end of Chapter I, the condensed, historical time, the mythological time, and the biographical time meet each other in Caldwell’s closing remark: “One minute ago, flint-chipping, fire-kindling, death-foreseeing, a tragic animal appeared … called Man” (Updike 46). The teacher does not only outline the Darwinian Theory of Evolution, but he also metaphorically explains that the act of physical abuse, committed by him a minute ago, turned him into a “death-foreseeing man,” because this incident can potentially destroy his teaching career. Consequently, at the end of Chapter I, Caldwell
sets off on the journey towards his metaphorical and actual death. Presumably, the instability of the chronotope in the novel as a whole can be explained by the analogous influence of the condensed time.

2. Adventure-time

Since the text aims at the biographical portrayal of the main character through the description of three days in his life, the temporal dimension of the text has to employ the adventure-time as its constituent. Due to its characteristics, the adventuristic time helps introduce an unlimited number of events to disclose the protagonist’s persona without distorting its integrity. Moreover, the time of certain events seems to not affect the “realistic” time. For example, when George Caldwell picks up a hitchhiker on his way to work, he agrees to drive several extra miles to help the stranger. All morning the teacher rushed his son to get ready and leave in order to arrive at school on time; the protagonist’s tardiness could potentially worsen his relationship with the supervising principal. Peter mentions that it takes twenty minutes to drive to Olinger, and yet they had only seventeen minutes remaining until the first bell rings. Consequently, after Caldwell gives a ride to the hitchhiker, Peter believes that they have lost their chance to make it, but somehow they miraculously arrive just in time when “the last children [are] crowding into the doors” (Updike 92). Time seems to slow down, or even stop, when George Caldwell faces his adventures. Bakhtin also mentions that the adventuristic time often appears at moments when something unusual happens to the characters who, in their turn, take a passive role in such circumstances:
Moments of adventuristic time occur at those points when the normal course of events, the normal, intended or purposeful sequence of life’s events is interrupted. These points provide an opening for the intrusion of nonhuman forces – fate, gods, villains – and it is precisely these forces, and not the heroes, who in adventure-time take all the initiative. (“The Dialogic Imagination” 95)

According to Bakhtin, the adventure-time is controlled by chance and affected by capricious gods. The extraordinary events mostly happen to George Caldwell on the road. According to Bakhtin, the image of the road is often metaphorical and exists as a rudiment of the folkloric literary past where “the road is almost never merely a road, but always suggests a whole, or a part of, ‘the path of life’” (“The Dialogic Imagination” 120). Forming a constituent part of the topography, the road simultaneously embodies the past, the present, and the future. The two strangers the teacher meets on his way make him literally change direction and, thus, possibly his future: Caldwell takes an extra three-mile drive because of the hitchhiker, and he goes to a hotel because of the drunkard. Updike’s “Mythological Index” suggests that both men have mythological counterparts, Hermes and Dionysus. They function as the servants of fate, distracting George Caldwell from the preplanned course. The hitchhiker reminds George Caldwell of his lost dreams, while the drunk man forces him to consider his readiness to die. Despite the fact that the portraits of the two strangers provided in the text suggest that they are random, insignificant encounters, the mythological connotations behind their images promote the idea that they interrupt Caldwell’s agency. The two strangers function as the agents of
fate in the adventure-time of the novel. George Caldwell comes to school a little late and his arrival concludes Chapter II. However, Chapter III opens with a sentence indicating that now Chiron, the noble centaur, is slightly late to his class. The shared temporal marker of tardiness not only draws a parallel between the two characters, but it also suggests that their lives are affected by the same force of chance.

**3. Clocks as Temporal Markers**

The temporal dimension finds its representation in spatial markers and the images of clocks become an objectified form of the temporal dimension; furthermore, they also reflect the characters’ perception of time. George Caldwell’s family owns two clocks that are placed next to each other. The old clock belongs to Pop Kramer, the teacher’s father-in-law, who inherited it from his father; everybody in the family knows that the old clock shows the exact time. It is worth noting, that Pop Kramer’s mythological counterpart is Kronos, the Greek god who is sometimes understood as a personification of time. The fact that Kramer’s clock shows the time correctly arises from the abovementioned interpretation of the ancient deity. In the mythological chronotope, Chiron is a son of Kronos, and, in Chapter I, Venus reminds the centaur of this biographical fact. However, the realistic chronotope reveals an inconsistency in that George Caldwell’s father died and Pop Kramer is not directly related to him. This discrepancy between the myth and the fictional biography foreshadows the protagonist’s disconnection from the realistic time represented by Pop Kramer’s clock. Moreover, George Caldwell prefers to live in accordance with the time of his cheap, red clock that is seven minutes fast. The red clock reflects Caldwell’s unique perception of time; driven by the fear of being late, the
protagonist rushes through his life. The obituary reports that the main character engaged himself in a number of extra-curricular school activities as well as “the affairs of the community” (Updike 174). George’s tendencies to rush and to overwork himself result from both his fear of death and his perception of time as something that continuously shrinks. The main character believes that he would not live longer than his father who died at the age of forty nine. When Caldwell risked arriving to school late, Peter “felt squeezed in the dwindling time,” but his perception of time most likely reflects George Caldwell’s sensation (Updike 68). The protagonist’s perception of time is closely related to the abovementioned notion of movement and the leitmotif of mortality; progressing through time and space, the teacher comes closer to his end and simultaneously manages to escape death as long as he moves faster. Despite his attempts to be punctual, the main character is late several times throughout the novel; thus, he slows down his movement. Caldwell’s presentiment about his early death and the plot of the myth of Chiron encourage the reader to interpret his tardiness as the signs of the approaching closure.

The clock-related imagery often contributes to the development of the leitmotif of human mortality. When the protagonist describes Peter’s regular problems with his health, he compares the chronic disease to clockwork (Updike 196). A clichéd comparison gains additional undertones in the context of the novel. George Caldwell tends to explain Peter’s regular colds as resulting from his psoriasis because he believes that everything in the human body is interconnected. The reader knows that the protagonist feels uncomfortable in his own body and blames it for his foreseeable death. For the teacher, bodily malfunctions – especially on a regular basis – symbolize human
mortality. In the context of the abovementioned motif, Kramer’s old clock can be interpreted as a representation of ever-lasting, eternal time, while George’s red clock symbolizes mortality and the finiteness of the protagonist’s life.

Every time the image of a clock appears in the novel it indicates either that Caldwell gradually runs out of time, or that he will soon face a new challenge. For instance, when Hummel extracts the arrow from Caldwell’s leg, the protagonist keeps thinking about time: “A clock in his head was ticking on; the school called to him urgently” (Updike 16). He feels that by ceasing the role as the active doer, he yields to time and, possibly, brings his death closer. Guided by his desire to stay active, he refuses to take a due sabbatical. On the one hand, he has to earn money to provide a better education for his son; on the other hand, a break in teaching would immediately bring him to “the junkyard” (Updike 249). The protagonist views spare time as a destructive force. Interestingly, the word “junkyard” alludes to the motifs of mortality and corporality which are partially represented by the protagonist’s car. The analogy between the main character and his car suggests that Caldwell interprets life, the active consumption of time, as a constant movement or action, while death is associated with rest. This representation of time can be explained by inherited characteristics of a Plutarchan biographical time that does not influence, but rather “discloses,” the character. Consequently, the text encompasses numerous events and details that keep the protagonist active in order to reveal his personality.
4. Temporal Markers of the Dominant Chronotopes

The narrative does not limit itself to the biographical time; the reader occasionally comes across the temporal markers of the three dominating chronotopes, predominately in the context of the leitmotif of mortality. In the realistic chronotope, time is a condition of gradual deterioration: people grow older, cars break down, and the Olinger museum displays ancient artifacts as evidence of history. When George Caldwell asks one of his students to name some erosional agents, she mentions time and it makes the teacher think about her answer. The student’s response reminds the protagonist of the finiteness of his time on earth. According to the rules of the realistic chronotope, George Caldwell should age and his body should reveal some signs of “deterioration.” However, instead, Peter describes him as a person who looked younger than an average fifty-year-old man: “He still had a full head of hair, barely touched by gray. … [he] seemed changeless” (Updike 64). George Caldwell’s unusual appearance can be explained by the influence of the mythological chronotope, in which Chiron, the protagonist’s mythological twin, possesses immortality. Furthermore, in Greek mythology, people die in tragic circumstances and not because of age; thus, the laws of aging should not be the reason of the anticipated tragic ending of the novel. The main character’s body seems to exist in accordance with the characteristics of the mythological time while his consciousness has to operate in the realistic, cyclical everyday-time. George Caldwell’s life illustrates his theory of a cell, which gives up its immortality in order to take on a specific function in a compromised environment. The protagonist has to experience the routine of regular work in order to fulfill the function of a provider, but he does not enjoy being a teacher.
Becoming a vicious circle, the cyclic nature of everyday-time places a strain on the main character. At the beginning of the novel, Peter notices that his father has to fight frustration every time he goes to work: “I [Peter] began to understand. After every weekend, my father had to gather his nerve to go back to teaching” (Updike 48). Moreover, the reader is forced to experience the burdensome cyclicity of the protagonist’s life through the detailed descriptions of commuting, day-time at school, and the evening search for a place to spend the night on the way home. George Caldwell experiences pressure from both the mythological time and the realistic time.

The leitmotif of mortality inevitably engages the Christian interpretation of the issue; the realistic time occasionally meets the time of the religious chronotope. Due to his religious beliefs George Caldwell refuses to accept the idea that time controls people’s lives or, in other words, the concept of realistic time. In Chapter III, the protagonist mentions a common saying “time and tide for no man wait” because he wants Peter to get ready for school faster, otherwise they may be late (Updike 62). Soon Caldwell’s father-in-law repeats a modified version of the saying, but the main character finds the proverb frustrating and almost insulting. George does not want to admit that time, in the current society, determines his way of life; instead, he finds a way to question the authority of time. The protagonist remembers that God created people in the image and likeness of himself and, thus, people must be superior to time: “I was a minister’s son. I was brought up to believe, and I still believe it, that God made Man as the best thing in his Creation. If that’s the case, who are this time and tide that are so almighty superior to us?” (Updike 63). His interpretation of time possibly alludes to the
The immortality of a human soul for which time on earth is not more than a glimpse.

Theoretically, George Caldwell’s religious beliefs should give him a sense of control, but he still fears being late and losing his job. Only when the protagonist repeats the “time and tide” phrase at the end of the novel, the reader senses his readiness to die.

George and Peter have to spend two nights away from their family because of the car breaking down and the snowstorm. In the context of their journey back home, the abovementioned common phrase acquires new connotations. George Caldwell understands that the past three days broke his everyday routine, but time does not stop; life will move on even if he does not wake up the next day. Feeling the pressure of the approaching closure, he tries to prepare everything for his departure. George puts in order all the financial records at school and suddenly changes his shopping habits from “customarily niggardly” to extravagant (Updike 283). The protagonist’s behavior reveals his readiness to die; George Caldwell accepted death. Despite the fact that the protagonist has certain struggles with his religious identity caused by his conversion from Presbyterianism to Lutheranism, he remains a person of faith. Only the religious interpretation of time could help the protagonist accept the power of time and his mortality. In Chapter VII, George recites the beginning of “Song of Passaic” by John Alleyne MacNab after Hester pronounces a phrase in French that means “god is fine” to cheer him up. The sentence about God’s greatness immediately makes him think about the divine laws of time: “The great Jehovah wisely planned/ All things of Earth, divinely grand; And, in his way, all nature tends/ To laws divine, to serve His ends” (MacNab qtd.
in Updike 195). The cited stanza explains that the finiteness of human life constitutes a part of natural processes and a bigger divine plan that people should accept.

Before George Caldwell mentions “time and tide” for the last time, he cannot give up his life on earth for the promise of an eternal life afterwards. In his conversation with Mr. Phillips, he learns that a former student of Olinger High School died while giving a flying lesson when his student made a mistake. The protagonist wonders if dying young makes a difference and if it lets people feel ready; at the same time, he confides in Mr. Phillips that death scares him even though teaching is killing him. While the poem “Song of Passaic” represents the religious chronotope, teaching demonstrates George Caldwell’s attachment to the realistic chronotope. The protagonist’s perception of time incorporates both a belief in the afterlife and the importance of his monotonous life on earth. The narrator does not describe how exactly the protagonist changes his attitude towards death, but his conversation with Mrs. Hummel provides two hints. After George returns to his friend’s house, the first thing he says is “Boy, Old Man Winter made up for lost time” (Updike 278). The snowfall that caused schools to cancel classes reminded the teacher of the laws of nature; winter inevitably follows fall as death inevitably concludes life. Interestingly, the protagonist once used the phrase “I’m in Old Man Winter’s belly” to describe his recent melancholy; presumably, Old Man Winter can be understood as a metaphor of time in Caldwell’s language. Thus, the abovementioned statement regarding “lost time” can also describe Caldwell’s presentiment regarding his coming death that made up for time spent in the race with the protagonist.
In the morning, the teacher visited his school to look through his financial records concerning ticket sales for school sporting events. The atmosphere of an empty school building made him think that teachers should live there alone and students should not be allowed there. George Caldwell says that an empty school is the only place where he does not feel like “somebody [is] sitting on the back of [his] neck all the time” (Updike 278). For the first time, the protagonist imagines himself outside of the teacher’s role and feels free. Irreversible laws of nature, in combination with the taste of freedom, make George Caldwell accept the essence of death. He does not have to fear his mortality because whenever his death comes it will find him still teaching and living a life he does not enjoy; if anything, death would liberate him.

Chapter IX marks another chronotopic shift and the domination of the mythological chronotope. The reader follows the last moments of Chiron’s life. During his farewell walk, the centaur notices that “even in the dead of winter the sere twigs prepare their small buds;” his sacrificial death means life for another person. George Caldwell’s acceptance of the notion of death reflects Chiron’s desire to sacrifice his life that only causes pain. At the end of the novel, the motif of immortality completes its circle and encompasses the time of all three dominant chronotopes. In the myth, the centaur was placed in the sky dome where he still exists as the constellation Sagittarius; Chiron received an eternal life in return for his lost immortality. According to the epilogue, the noble teacher of Hercules and Achilles “assists in regulation of our destinies” even though people do not recognize it (Updike 299). In the mythological time, the protagonist’s counterpart regains his immortality in a new form of a celestial object
and an agent of fate replacing the role of a passive victim with the role of an active force. At the same time, according to the Laws of Nature, George Caldwell continues his life through his offspring and his former students which potentially can be an eternal cycle as long as his genes and his knowledge are passed on. In the religious chronotope he is granted the right to live eternally for his righteous deeds on earth. The conflict between the multiple layers of the temporal dimension resolves itself upon first the metaphorical and soon the actual death of the main character.
Conclusion

The analysis of the chronotope in The Centaur demonstrates that the organization of the novel follows the principle of a predetermined ending. The plot acquires the explanatory function and demonstrates the reasons for the tragic outcome through the interaction of the three dominant chronotopes in the text. The competition between the spatial-temporal components of the novel becomes the source of a strain in the protagonist’s life. As has been mentioned earlier, the main character’s body has a strong connection with all three chronotopes of the novel by being their cross point. Consequently, conflicts between the spatial-temporal paradigms affect George Caldwell’s life and physical conditions. The motif of mortality introduced by the myth about Chiron the centaur evolves into a symbol of the chronotopic laws that guarantee the tragic ending of the protagonist’s life. Meanwhile, the motifs of mortality and supervision reveal the crucial importance of the involvement of the chronotope in the plot development.

In order to present the complex structure of the novelistic chronotope in an accessible manner, the analysis focuses on temporal and spatial dimensions separately. The research demonstrates that different chronotopic markers acquire specific functions in the text. For example, the spatial dimension of the text mainly fulfills the communicative function and the function of a signifier. Some spatial markers warn of the future twists of fate that cannot be avoided, while the signs let the main character feel prepared for them. Certain components of the spatial dimension help the reader and the
protagonist identify the characters’ mythological counterparts in the text; this decoding assists in the analysis of the interaction between the dominant chronotopes. The novel also contains a number of reoccurring spatial components that function both as the additional elements linking the chronotopes and as representations of the major motifs of corporality, mortality, and supervision shared by the dominant chronotopes. Meanwhile, the temporal dimensions of the dominant chronotope compete with each other trying to subjugate the flow of the protagonist’s life, and only the death of the main character can resolve the dispute between the dominant chronotopes. Besides, the temporal component of the novel helps to unearth and exhibit George Caldwell’s personality, his pessimistic altruism, and his readiness for sacrifice.

An exploration of the novelistic chronotope reveals that The Centaur inherited its certain characteristics from the ancient novelistic forms. As has been stated earlier, the enclosure of the plot between the mythological epigraph and epilogue foreshadows the protagonist’s premature death. In his monograph “Updike’s Novels: Thorns Spell a Word,” Jeff Campbell describes the structure of The Centaur as a sandwich in which Chapters I and IX serve as “the outer layers … , the bread which holds its various ingredients together” (74). According to Campbell, such structure allows the reader to appreciate the presence of the mythological components as another flavorful ingredient. However, the preceding research demonstrates that the myth is present on all levels of narration as an integral part of the text and cannot be omitted. To continue Campbell’s metaphor, the effect of “the sandwich” is achieved by the epilogue and by the epigraph that form the pretext and the framework of the novel. These two components mark the
limits of time and space in the text and provide the predetermined ending which, in its turn, encourages the reader to focus on the main character. The temporal components of the novel bring George Caldwell’s personality to the foreground especially by means of the specific biographical time. Time also becomes the major component of the leitmotif of mortality in *The Centaur*. The temporal dimension emphasizes the predetermined ending of the novel and foreshadows the protagonist’s approaching death.

While Updike’s experiments with time and space in the novel reveal a certain degree of novelty, the temporal components of the text seem to comply with the patterns of representation of time in literature during the second half of the twentieth century. Referencing research of several literary critics, Rachel Falconer suggests in her essay “Bakhtin’s Chronotope and the Contemporary Story” that the second half of the twentieth century is marked by a new consciousness of time. Elaborating on Katherine Hayles’ comment regarding the 1960’s and an expectation for World War III which never happened, Falconer suggests that people “have reached a dead end with the temporal duration” or, in other words, “temporal impasse” (706). In the context of the abovementioned observations, Updike’s third novel can be interpreted as a reflection of the new perception of time in the Western culture. For George Caldwell, just as for the characters in Falconer’s research, time “has run out” and “preventative or recuperative action seems impossible” (721). The predetermined closure of the novel reflects people’s expectation for a new tragedy. Consequently, the leitmotif of mortality underlying the development of the plot also exists as a symbol of expiring time. The “sense of temporal impasse,” present in the Western society of the 1960’s, raises the philosophical questions
of death and afterlife which are addressed in the novel under study (Falconer 706). Even if John Updike does not share a sense of finiteness of time, his character, George Caldwell, can be interpreted as a portrait of an American who has faced the hardships of the Great Depression and anxieties of World War II. Moreover, his readiness to sacrifice for a better future for his son also reflects the fear of approaching time that can be potentially worse than everything that people have experienced during the first half of the twentieth century. Consequently, the chronotope of the novel under study does not merely reveal the character of George Caldwell, but it also embodies the perception of the historical chronotope in 1960’s. *The Centaur*, just as any work of literature, is inevitably connected to the “contemporaneity from which the author observes” the events of the text (Bakhtin “The Dialogic Imagination” 255). Thus, the realm of literature and culture as components of that contemporaneity “constitutes the indispensable context of [the] literary work and of the author’s position within it” (Bakhtin, “The Dialogic Imagination” 255-256).
Notes

1. On the problem related to the “great time” and “small time,” see Shepherd.

2. For classification of chronotopes in a modernist novel, see Keunen 421-436.

3. Updike was familiar with Grades’ text and cited a part of the section “The Homeric and Orphic Creation Myths” in *The Centaur*, Chapter III. See Grades 10-11, Updike 99.

4. Later in Roman mythology Heracles was referred to as Hercules.

5. Hereinafter, religious chronotope.


7. Calque is a mean to borrow a word from a foreign language while translating each morpheme or word component separately.
Works Cited


Campbell, Jeff H. “Interview with John Updike.” Plath 84 – 105.


