

The Significance of Time in Colleen Hoover's November 9: A Temporal Perspective

Dr. Heba Maher Attia Hashim

Lecturer in English Literature, Department of English, Faculty of Arts,
New Valley University, Egypt.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37745/ejells.2013/vol11n1726>

Published February 15, 2023

Citation: Hashim H. M. A. (2022) The Significance of Time in Colleen Hoover's November 9: A Temporal Perspective, *European Journal of English Language and Literature Studies*, Vol.11, No.1, pp.17-26

ABSTRACT: *This paper aims to examine Colleen Hoover's November 9 from a temporal perspective, showing how the element of time reveals a specific implication in the novel. The paper's theoretical framework presents an overview of the significance of time in literature in general and the novel genre in particular. By choosing 'November 9' as a title for her book, Hoover implies that time is given special prominence that reflects itself in the whole narrative. Throughout the course of events, it is noted that time has a clear influence on the various aspects of the novel, such as theme, plot, structure, and characterization. The paper explores how each of these elements reflects the importance of temporality in the novel.*

KEYWORDS: time significance, colleen hoover, *November 9*, literature, temporality

INTRODUCTION

Best known for her novel *It Ends with Us*, published in 2016, Colleen Hoover is a contemporary American novelist born and raised in Texas in 1979. She could outstandingly establish herself as a distinguished figure in the genres of romance and young adult fiction. Among her famous novels are *Stammed* (2012), *Hopeless* (2013), *Ugly Love* (2014), *November 9* (2015), *Too Late* (2016), *Without Merit* (2017), *Maybe Now* (2018), *Regretting You* (2019), *Layla* (2020), and *It Starts with Us* (2022). Colleen is also the author of these short stories: "A Father's Kiss" from *The Kiss: An Anthology about Love and Other Close Encounters* (2014), "Saint" which was published in the *One More Step Anthology* (2021), and "The Dress" that appeared in the *Two More Days Anthology* (2022).

Published in 2015, *November 9* is a romance tracing the details of the peculiar love story between Ben Kessler, a young novelist at college, and his unexpected inspirer Fallon O'Neil, a teen actress searching for a chance in the world of acting. Both Ben and Fallon are eighteen years old. Fallon's mother once advised her not to be serious about any love relationship till she turns 23. As Fallon tells us in the novel:

My mother...read ever book she could find on parenting, marriage, finding yourself a woman, through all these books, she concluded that girls change more between the ages of sixteen and twenty-three than at any other time in their lives. And it's important to her that I don't spend any of these years in love with some guy, because if I do, she fears I'll never learn how to fall in love with *myself*. (38)

Fallon admires the idea suggested by her mother and decides to apply it to the first relationship she will be engaged in. Meeting Accidentally, Fallon and Ben are attracted to each other, spend some of the day together, and begin to fall for one another. To test the faithfulness of their newly born relationship in an untraditional manner, they decide to meet once a year on the same date, November 9, for five years, hoping that such an unusual experiment can provide them with a sense of confidence they are both in need of. They approve certain items in their emotional agreement, the most important of which is not to contact each other by phone, social media, or any other means of communication.

Significantly, the agreed-upon time for the two lovers' annual meeting, November 9, reminds the female protagonist of a tragic event in her life as it marks the time when a fire caused her body and face to be scarred, thus lessening her opportunities as an actress. The question that can be posed now is this: Can the chosen date, which previously denoted a time of pain for the heroine, change into a new hopeful start for her, inspire the male protagonist with a happy ending for the novel he is busy writing, and, more importantly, mark the beginning of a truly successful love relationship between Fallon and Ben? Or will 'November 9' end the romance in heartbreak for both protagonists? The following pages provide an answer to this crucial question.

Theoretical Framework

The Time Element and its Significance in a Narrative

Time plays a significant role in literary works, particularly the novel genre. According to Popova and Cuffari, "narratives depend on time as probably no other written form does" (8). A narrative occurs within a particular setting, and its events run through a definite time. Authors use the element of time to achieve specific goals in their literary works. Thus, they make out a time frame for the story, allowing actions to take place within a specific period. An author may weave the actions of his narrative in one day or even one hour, whereas another, for example, may make actions go on for one full year or more, as we see in Hoover's *November 9*. A time frame is of great importance for the narrative because, according to it, the actions of the story are set and arranged, and the expected roles of characters are constructed and distributed.

When given special importance by the writer, time affects other aspects of the narrative. For example, "a shift in the time element from a subsidiary role to a role of prominence in...the narrative" leads to "an intensified rhythm" (Murach 3). This is what Hoover does in *November 9* where time is prominent and significant. Accordingly, it influences

the course of events, governs the actions of characters, and determines the ending of the story. Critics see that this significant role given to time in the literary work is one of the major characteristics of modern and postmodern literature. Of the eminent modernist writers who place temporality at the center of their works are Virginia Woolf, D.H. Lawrence, Franz Kafka, and William Faulkner. In the postmodernist era, many well-known writers employ time as a significant feature in their works. Of these are Samuel Becket, Thomas Pynchon, Vladimir Nabokov, and William Burroughs. For both modernist and postmodernist writers, time is viewed as a fundamental element in the literary work. Virginia Woolf's *Jacob's Room* is a modernist work that focuses on the significance of the time element in the novel. Likewise, in the postmodern play *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett, time is a central theme.

In *Narrative Discourse*, Gérard Genette discusses the element of narrative time in the literary work, referring to three key concepts: order, duration, and frequency. These concepts are crucial in understanding the relationships between what Genette calls 'the story time' and 'the narrative time'. Shedding more light on this issue, Theodore Martin explains:

Order refers to the relation between the order of events in the story and the alternate order those same events are given in the narrative....The second way to assess the temporality of narrative is through a contrast in *duration*: how long the events of the story "actually" took versus how long the narrative spends narrating them....Finally, Genette uses the idea of *frequency* to describe the narrative temporality of repetition, which allows a narrative both to return multiple times to a single event and to condense multiple happenings of an event into a single instance of narration (2-3).

The setting of a literary work, particularly a novel, includes both time and space, two elements that "are of an utmost importance . . . to the narrative" (Rata 112). Critics used to refer to space as the place where events occur. On the other hand, time was seen as the temporal sequence through which events proceed in the narrative. However, more recently, a new concept has emerged, combining both space and time in one term, namely, 'spacetime' or 'chronotope'. It is worth mentioning that this new concept was invented by the famous Russian philosopher and critic Mikhail Bakhtin who employed the concept as an essential element in his theory of meaning in language and literature. In *Narrative Space and Time*, Gomel justifies the combination of the two elements of space and time in one concept by stating that "narrative is always temporal and the narrative representation of space cannot be separated from its representation of time" (26). In the Preface to *Bakhtin's Theory of the Literary Chronotope: Reflections, Applications, Perspectives*, the importance of Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the chronotope is highlighted:

Bakhtin's theory of the chronotope...addresses not only the perception of the fictional world but also points at the spatial and temporal embedding of human action in order to offer a better understanding of how humans act in their biotopes and semiospheres. (Bemong et al. iv).

Thus, the above discussion about time and its significance in a narrative indicates that the element of time plays a vital role in literature. As shown in the works of modern and postmodern writers, time is a key feature in literature. The following pages present Hoover's treatment of time in her novel *November 9*, showing how the prominence given by the author to time in the book affects the various elements of the narrative and makes events go around the aspect of temporality.

DISCUSSION

The Significance of Time in November 9

Colleen Hoover's *November 9* is a novel mainly based on the element of time. The temporal significance is revealed in all aspects of the novel. In other words, the importance of time is reflected in the novel's title, theme, plot, actions, structure, and characterization. Throughout the novel, Hoover gives time a prominent role, accordingly making it govern the course of events from the start to the end. Putting time at the center of her novel, the author makes all events go around it, and all significant plans and decisions made by characters are set and conducted according to it. By doing so, Hoover increases suspense in the novel and makes the reader follow events in curiosity to know what will happen, how the time specified in the novel will lead to the end of the story, and what kind of conclusion will take place.

The title, *November 9*, clearly indicates that time plays a significant role in the novel. This particular date not only carries specific significance but also works as the axis around which the events of the novel revolve and develop. A noteworthy point to refer to here is that November 9 refers to the time when the heroine was severely scarred on a considerable part of her body due to a house fire two years earlier than the events of the story began. Fallon was sixteen years old at that time. In this sense, the date has been a source of sorrow and disappointment for the girl not only because it reminds her of a horrible experience, but also because the accident resulted in the spreading of scars on her face and body, and this will therefore hinder the achievement of her dreams as a successful actress. Fallon feels physically and psychologically hurt by this issue. She states in the novel,

I bring my left hand up and touch the scars that run across the left side of my face, over my jaw and down my neck. . . . Scars that constantly remind me that the fire was real and not just a nightmare I can force myself awake from with a pinch on the arm. . . . The way it *looks* is

something else. Like each of my flaws has been blanketed in pink highlights, put on display for the entire world to see. No matter how hard I try to hide them with my hair and clothes, they're there. They'll be always there. A permanent reminder of the night that destroyed all the best parts of me. (7)

What adds to Fallon's predicament is that her father always disappoints her by stating that she can never succeed in acting because of her injuries. As a result, Fallon begins to lose confidence in her abilities, and despair starts to seep into her ambitious spirit that yearns for fame and success. The father expresses his negative view about his daughter's future while having lunch together on November 9, the second anniversary of the house fire that caused Fallon's injury. Here, Hoover implies that the heroine needs an unconventional, bold event to take her out of her misery and open a new gate of hope for her. Making time a priority in her book, Hoover makes that glimpse of hope shine in Fallon's life on the same date that previously led to her agony, November 9. Significantly, Ben, the male protagonist, appears for the first time in the narrative on that date, November 9, taking the frustrated heroine into a new world of delight and hopefulness.

The element of time in *November 9* influences the theme of the novel. The central theme of the novel is love; the book is mainly a romance dealing with the love story between Fallon and Ben. Time reveals itself in each detail of the relationship between the two lovers. The first time they meet is November 9, a date that governs all their actions throughout the narrative. Both lovers agree to meet regularly one time only on the same date for five years to see how far they progress in their relationship and how much of their set plan is achieved. Even the advice given to Fallon by her mother, not to have any emotional relationship until she turns 23, reveals the importance of time. Thus, it is time that determines the characters' actions in the novel. Likewise, one of the agreement items between Fallon and Ben is that the young man, a promising novelist, writes a novel about their love story. The plan is that he writes what happens between them each year, and by the end of the pre-set five years, he is expected to complete the novel. Here, time determines planning and works as an indicator of achievement and completion.

In addition to love as the novel's central theme, *November 9* evokes many other themes, such as healing, choice, confidence, believing in oneself, forgiveness, ambition, loyalty, determination, acceptance, and fulfillment. All these ideas are related, in one way or another, to time, and their accomplishment heavily depends on the element of temporality. For example, the theme of healing is controlled by the five-year span agreed upon between the two main characters. Fallon has to go through this specific time to restore her lost confidence and make sure that the relationship with Ben is successful. Because time heals, the heroine must go through a specific time phase to let time cure her weary soul. It is only by the end of the previously set five-year period that she feels she is mature enough to trust herself in a love relationship. So her spiritual and

emotional healing comes at the end of the book, a time which also marks Ben's healing of the constant fears that he may fail as a writer. These are "the healing effects of temporality," to quote Ila Ahlawat (29).

Similarly, the theme of fulfillment entirely depends on time. Fallon and Ben come at the conclusion of the book to feel satisfied and fulfilled. However, this sense of spiritual fulfillment is also related to the physical fulfillment of the goals they set to accomplish their plan within five years. Every year, on November 9, Fallon and Ben meet to assess their progress and know the achieved part of their plan. By the end of the specified period, all the goals of their plans are accomplished, and they feel fulfilled accordingly.

Popova and Cuffari argue that "human experience is inherently temporal and involves placing events, symbols, and actions in a temporal scheme" (1). This meaning is revealed in the plot of Hoover's *November 9* which reflects the importance given to time by the author. It is noted that all events of the novel revolve around the November 9 date. All characters' actions and plans are woven in the light of the five-year duration that Fallon and Ben determine to test the seriousness and reliability of their love relationship. The book opens with Fallon and her father having lunch together on November 9, the date that refers to the second anniversary of a bad experience in the family life when their house was burned, and Fallon was seriously injured and severely scarred. During lunch, the girl tells her father that she is leaving for New York to find an opportunity to continue her acting career. Disappointingly, the father criticizes her decision telling her that she is no longer suitable for such a profession, especially with those scars that deform her appearance. At this point, something strange happens, taking all the girl's life and plans in a completely new direction. A stranger suddenly interrupts the meeting, telling the father that he is Fallon's boyfriend and rebuking the father for discouraging his daughter. The father angrily leaves.

Fallon and Ben spend the rest of the day together and feel mutually attracted to each other. Ben encourages Fallon to pursue her dreams and go to New York. More importantly, they agree to meet once a year on November 9 for five years to see whether they love each other. They put tasks for each other to carry out each year and make up their mind to discuss achievement every November 9. They firmly believe that this can be an indicator of their seriousness and determination to make their relationship a success. While the novel is full of serious challenges, suffering, and grief that are experienced by the two main characters, Hoover ends the novel happily, making Fallon and Ben get together on their final yearly meeting, fully understanding and convincingly loving each other, forgiving each other's pasts, and enthusiastically deciding to move forward and weave the rest of their lives together. Thus, time influences the plot, governs the course of events, and marks the novel's ending.

According to Kelli Nelson, "time treatment determines the structure of the work, as well as how the characters will be presented within that framework" (7). The way Hoover handles time in *November 9* clearly influences the structure of the novel. The

book is divided into sections, each reflecting one of the five years in which Fallon and Ben plan to work to attain their goals. Related to the structure are the narration style and the point of view element in the novel. The sections of the novel are narrated from the first-person viewpoint of the two main characters, Fallon and Ben. Each section also carries the narrator's name as a sub-title, with a primary title showing the time in which the events occur. For instance, the first section has the primary title 'First November 9th', and the sub-title 'Fallon' as a reference to the narrator who recounts events from a first-person point of view. This opening section opens with Fallon narrating how she feels towards her father, Donovan O'Neil, who always belittles her with his downgrading view about her chances of being a good actress due to the scars that distort her face and body. It is worth noting that Fallon blames her father because she believes that he was the main reason behind the house fire that severely affected her appearance and caused her suffering. Also, she feels she cannot forgive him because he forgot her inside the house and did not remember to save her. As a result, Fallon adopts an attitude of hatred and anger toward him. In the first section of the novel, she mentions:

I wonder what kind of sound it would make if I were to smash this glass against the side of his head. It's a thick glass. His head is hard...."So, yeah. I'm little shocked, but it's happening," he says. His voice causes my grip to tighten around the glass in hopes that it stays in my hand and doesn't actually end up against the side of his skull. "Fallon?" He clears his throat and tries to soften his words, but they still come at me like knives. (3)

However, Fallon comes at the end to come back to her father and restore the lost intimacy between them. This sense of acceptance of everyone directly results from the love that shines on her life and fills her heart with forgiveness for all. Perhaps the happiest person for Fallon's decision to get close once again to her father is Ben, not only because he feels regretful to be one the causes that have kept Fallon away from her father, but because he truly loves her and therefore wishes to see her happy with her family. This is how the young man puts it:

Hearing her say that she's having breakfast with her father makes me even happier than if she would have agreed to have breakfast with me. I know that her father isn't the ideal parent, but he's still her father. And I've felt so much guilt over the fact that I'm responsible for a lot of the strain in their relationship. (306)

Characterization in *November 9* is greatly affected by the element of time. The two main characters of the novel, Fallon and Ben, first meet by accident on November 9. They feel inclined to each other at this specific time. They relate the continuity of their relationship to time, as they set five years for testing their relationship. Their meetings occur in the light of a pre-planned time, November 9 of each year, for five straight

years. As time passes, they become, by the end of each year, older, wiser, and more mature, acquiring more experience and gaining new insights into life and its challenges. It is not their success on the emotional level that depends on time, but their success on the personal and professional levels as well. Only by allowing herself enough time could Fallon restore confidence in herself as a beautiful girl and a clever actress who is no longer embarrassed or affected by the scars on her body. The support and encouragement given to her by Ben on the significant date of November 9 when they first meet make a tremendous difference in her life and provide her with intensified doses of hopefulness and positive energy. Accordingly, she is not held back by the disappointing attitude of others and, following Ben's advice, resumes her traveling plans and flies to New York on the same day of November 9, that date that reshapes her whole life and depicts her moments of pain and healing, grief and delight, rejection and acceptance.

For Ben, time is also significant on both personal and professional levels. One of the agreement items between him and Fallon is that he writes a novel about them and completes it by the end of the five-year span of time that works as the time framework of their relationship assessment. Whenever he finishes a part of the manuscript, he feels happy to discuss it during his annual meeting with Fallon. By the end of the five years he can successfully complete his novel and ends its story – happily, exactly as he manages to close his real one with Fallon. This achievement, which came as a result of punctuality and accurate adherence to the set time allocated for the task, makes him keen to complete the task on time. Here, time works as a source of motivation and hard work. As Ben tells Fallon in the manuscript:

You saved me the day we met, Fallon. I know I was only eighteen, but my life would have turned out so different had we not spent that time together. The first night we had to say goodbye, I drove straight home and started writing this book. It became my new life goal. My new passion. I took college more seriously. I took life more seriously. (299)

On a personal level, Ben's successful completion of the manuscript enhances his self-confidence and marks the beginning of his professional career as a promising novelist. In fact, the manuscript is not only important as a means of restoring confidence and beginning a new career for Ben, but it also carries a symbolic feature. It works as a reminder for Ben of his commitment to Fallon. Moreover, it is a documentation of his honesty, as it contains the secrets from the past he hides from Fallon and does not speak about in their annual meetings.

Perhaps the most significant secret Ben was hiding from Fallon is that he was the person who caused the fire to spread to the house of Fallon's father at the time when Fallon was inside the house. The story was that Ben was sixteen years old when his mother

committed suicide and died. Because Donovan O'Neil, Fallon's father, was dating her at that time and broke up with her, Ben thought that O'Neil was responsible for his mother's death. For that reason, Ben, attempting to take revenge on Fallon's father, went to the latter's house and set fire to his car. The fire accidentally reached O'Neil's house, and Fallon was injured. Later, Ben knew from Ian, his brother, that their mother had committed suicide after learning that she had cancer. She did not want to cause trouble to her family because of her illness, so she committed suicide. Ben was honest in narrating the story in his manuscript. When Fallon reads the manuscript while it is still progressing and discovers that secret, she appreciates Ben's truthfulness, forgives the young man, and allows a feeling of satisfaction to creep into her soul. His confession, honesty, and sincere sense of regret made Fallon believe him and reach the conclusion that what Ben had done was not an evil act because he did not intend it. Ben gratefully narrates how Fallon has understandingly reacted to the situation:

Your actions from that night were not because you were a bad person, Ben. It was because you were a scared teenage boy and sometimes people make mistakes. You've carried so much guilt for what you did, and for so long. You can't ask for forgiveness, because there's nothing to forgive. If anything, I'm here for *your* forgiveness. Because I know your heart, Ben, and your heart is only capable of love. I should have recognized that last year when I doubted you. If I had just listened to you, then we could have avoided an entire year of heartache. So for that. . . I'm sorry. I'm *so* sorry. And I hope you can forgive me. (305)

In this sense, the manuscript is symbolically a means of healing for Ben and Fallon who truly loved each other, convincingly trusted each other, and tolerantly found an excuse for each other. The result was that "they lived happily," to quote Hoover's concluding words in *November 9* (307).

CONCLUSION

The present paper explored the significance of time in Colleen Hoover's *November 9*. In her treatment of time in the novel, Hoover makes it affect the course of events and the development of characters from start to end. To choose a title that explicitly states time as a key feature, Hoover prepares her readers to have a book that totally goes around temporality. Accordingly, when we read the novel, we find that time, as the author planned, manages every detail of the story and determines the way it closes. 'November 9' is the date when Fallon and Ben meet, admire each other, put up an untraditional plan for their relationship, follow the progress of their achievement, and finally celebrate the success of their love story. It is also the date that marks their pains and hopes, downs and ups, failure and accomplishment. The significance of time in *November 9* is not only reflected in the novel's title but also in its other aspects. The novel's theme, plot, structure, and characterization are all influenced by the element of time, which Hoover gives a prominent position in the narrative and deals with as both crucial and significant.

References

- Ahlawat, Ila. *Women and Temporality in Literature and Cinema: Negotiating with Timelessness*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021.
- Bemong, Nele et al. *Bakhtin's Theory of the Literary Chronotope: Reflections, Applications, Perspectives*. Gent: Academia Press, 2010.
- Gomel, Elana. *Narrative Space and Time: Representing Impossible Topologies in Literature*. New York: Routledge, 2014.
- Hoover, Colleen. *November 9*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2015.
- Martin, Theodore. "Temporality and Literary Theory." *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature*, 2016. Available at:
<http://literature.oxfordre.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.001.0001/acrefore-9780190201098-e-122?rskey=ZJOXIq&result=1>. Accessed February 02, 2023.
- Murach, Georgia McKeighan. *The Significance of the Time Element in Selected Novels by Juan Goytiso*. Published Master's Thesis. Fresno State College, Fresno, 1967.
- Nelson, Kelli Egan. *The Concept of Time in the Novels of Virginia Woolf*. Published Master's Thesis, the Graduate Faculty of Texas Technological College, Texas, 1969.
- Popova, Yanna and Cuffari, Elena. "Temporality of sense-making in narrative interactions." *Cognitive Semiotics*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2018. 1-14.
- Rata, Erina. "The Importance of Space and Time in Neil Gaiman's Novels." *Cultural Intertexts*, issue 5, 2016. 102-113.