

POWER OF OBJECTS

from the author

Thomas Jefferson once portrayed enlightenment as “the illimitable freedom of the human mind to explore and expose every subject susceptible of its contemplation.” Indeed, the opportunity to drink from the cup of knowledge is without question one of life’s greatest gifts. Since embarking on my studies at Syracuse University, I consider myself extremely fortunate to engage in the pursuit of wisdom and versatility that Jefferson so eloquently described.

The following piece was written during my freshman year for a writing studio that emphasized the importance of introspection, creative expression and the value of keen observation. Composing “In the Meantime” was a refreshing occasion to project my character in writing and enjoy the stylistic freedom of recalling memories, kindling my curiosity and recording my contemplation. It serves as a reminder to pay greater heed to what is often overlooked, to cherish what is simple in a world that seems increasingly complex, and to seize the opportunities presented with each fleeting moment.

from the professor

“In the Meantime” developed from a first-day assignment, in WRT 195, requiring students to write a one page descriptive essay about an object they either wore or carried. Sarah chose her watch. After reading “Ode to an Orange” by Larry Woiwode, students expanded their essays beyond mere description, considering their chosen object’s history, function (to them and others), as well as cultural, political, and symbolic significance. Sarah’s essay moves easily from the physical aspects of her watch, including its sound, to the universal implications of time. Comparing a watch to the humans who wear them, she also offers reflections on the history and machinations of time, from the earliest sundial, to the humorous treatment of time by contemporary comedians. Her essay closes by pulling readers into her topic, compelling us to reflect with her upon the time we have just spent reading. - Jane Oberg

In the Meantime

Everyday objects can have a profound impact on our lives

by Sarah Dickens

the it. factor

This essay effectively incorporates the personal voice, as evidenced by the use of the word “I.” Don’t be afraid of the first person!

the it. factor

The author refers to the watch as both a bracelet and a handcuff, something beautiful versus something restrictive. This opposition works to transcend the analysis from simply “the object” to a larger cultural construct.

the it. factor

The juxtaposition of the watch and the pulse has very powerful implications. How does it connect to the frequent comparisons made between various types of watches and various types of people?

I am sitting in a still room, borrowing a moment to inhale the serenity that seems to float in the air like a cloud of fog, and listening to the silence. Listening closely, I notice that the silence, an absence of apparent sound, is its own symphony; it is an orchestration that is being kept alive by a carefully beating drum. I concentrate on the drum’s beats, observing that its rhythm is steadily and confidently throbbing. When glancing, I make a discovery and erupt with laughter. At this moment, precisely 1:43 PM, I realize that the incessant pulsation is not the tempo of tranquility, but rather the ticking of my watch. A small, thin, golden band strapped to my wrist, the watch is a living creature; it has a face, hands, a heartbeat. It has its own mechanized mind, a willpower to keep ticking at the same pace despite the circumstances; some of the more durable watches even tick under water. Within each brisk movement of the second-hand, a human has laughed, some have shed tears, one is gripped by death, and yet another is being given the gift of life.

Just like the individuals who comprise the human race, these curious creatures come in all shapes and sizes, each with its own beauty. My watch, an example of those delicate timepieces fastened with a band of gold or silver, resembles a bracelet. Yet, there are watches with thicker straps; some with leather, plastic, and even bands of bulky cloth; watches with bold heavy-set numerals; timepieces with only dots or diamond-shaped accents to represent the twelve hours; as well as the contemporary digital watch. Despite the endless assortment of watches, each serves the very same purpose: creating a framework in which those who ride the roller coaster of modernized life must run their days.

Living in an era that challenges me to play a variety of roles and perform a frenzied and stressful juggling act as a one-man show, the watch fulfills the place of my stage director, acting as a guide, symbolizing order, and all too often telling me what to do. As I satisfy the obligations of a family member, friend, worker, learner, and citizen, the directions the arrows point on my watch dictate the amount of attention devoted to each of my demanding activities. My daily life rests on the foundation of routine and scheduling, both elements that are policed by the peculiar device that happens to be fastened around my lower left arm, just over the area where a nurse might take my pulse.

It is uncommon for me to see someone who does not wear a watch and is unable to know the correct time as he or she accomplishes the day’s tasks. It certainly seems as though nearly every individual walks around with a watch strapped to his or her wrist like a handcuff, carrying it wherever he or she may go so that it is always handy for a quick and unexpected reference. It is extremely difficult for me to contemplate the times when a watch was not an aspect of my physical identity and I believe that it is equally challenging for others. This is evidenced by the fact that many of my acquaintances rarely remove their watches, even when showering or sleeping. Though, why do we need our watches to regulate our lives when we are in a state of subconscious relaxation? Are we actually that anxious to anticipate the screaming of our alarm

clock in the hours of morning?

We permit this symbol of scheduled life to become not only a characteristic of our images, but also an aspect of our bodies. We insist on transporting it anywhere and everywhere to constantly remind ourselves of our dependence on the regulation that a watch seems to provide. The phrase “living by the clock” has been coined to quite accurately describe our addiction to time management. While established routines allow us to be more efficient, we have also thought it useful to swap common sense for the rule of the clock. No longer do we decide to sleep when we are tired, but when the clock informs us that sleep is convenient. I often find myself guilty of this crime against logic. Glancing at the clock and noticing it is “late,” I feel tempted to retire for the night whether or not I am truly fatigued. If I am sleepy during daylight hours, I withhold from satisfying my body’s command for the simple reason that “I don’t have time.” Similarly, we often do not let the natural process of hunger tell us when we should eat, but rather leave this task, once again, to the clocks. Our trusty watches are always there to inform us that we are approaching the lunch hour at work or our set time for dinner, which is sometimes deemed the “family hour.” Do we also need the clock to tell us when to take notice of our loved ones? Apparently, we do.

Looking at my watch, I realize that every link of its band is but the link of a chain enslaving me to a phenomenon that exists only in the human imagination. What does the watch measure, exactly? If you are struggling to conjure up a realistic answer, consider yourself one of many. The hands on a watch simply make circular sweeps across its face and yet the watch is regarded as a kind of measuring instrument. While I understand the notion of duration of time, the transitions between past, present, and future have about the same clarity as a muddy pond. I consider myself to be articulating these thoughts in the present, though with each letter I type, my thoughts become an aspect of the past, only to be shared with readers of the future. Somehow, the numbers on the face of the watch are thought to free us from this web of confusion. At this very moment, in Syracuse, New York, my watch reads 3:29 PM. The alarm clock on my armoire asserts that it is 3:31 PM. In Jerusalem right now, the approximate time is 10:30 PM. Yes, the numbers do help, don’t they?

Perhaps even more remarkable than the idea that we base our lives on measuring a non-existent quantity is the fact that we seem to have a biological clock as well. For instance, performing an unpleasant task may *feel* as if it “took a long time.” As a high school student, I had the habit of waking up only twenty minutes before leaving the house and I still think it remarkable how quickly the second hand seemed to spin when I needed to shake off my early morning sluggishness. Many times these hectic episodes would prompt my mother to yell to me from the next room in her delightful Hebrew accent, “Sari, it’s already seven!” Hearing these words, I would check my own watch to confirm my mother’s statement and usually find that her time estimate rounded a full ten minutes. Incidents such as these would never fail to remind me that while my mother, having been raised in Israel, embraces a cultural norm of rounding the time to avoid being concerned with trifles, my upbringing in American society has taught me to value minute-to-minute precision. The fabric of time may be perceived differently across cultures, but it still remains difficult for most of us to sidestep the irrationality of time the clock represents.

The greatest marvel of the watch may be that while it constrains us, it is an oppressor that we have chosen to empower. Before technology privileged humans to become accurate timekeepers by conveniently wearing a watch, merely calculating routines using the sunrise and sunset

the it. factor

The use of quotation marks around time-related terminology has great rhetorical impact.

the it. factor

The author’s voice takes a passive tone here, relating what the watch “seems” to do rather than making a direct statement regarding what it does. How would an active voice alter the tone of the essay?



the **it.** factor

This is a paper about the demands of time and efficiency. Is there a degree of irony that exists when this writing style is applied to that thesis? What was the author's purpose in that?



was not entirely satisfying. Looming in the curious mind of man was the inspiration for the sundial: the idea of not only distinguishing between day and night, but also dividing the day. By contrast, the wristwatch is extremely recent in the chronology of the evolution of the clock, or the timeline of the timepiece. Yet, the emergence of the watch as a commonplace item has prevented us from questioning notions of time. For instance, if time is fictitious, what does it actually mean to arrive someplace “late” or “on time?” Incredibly, some people even dream of the mind-boggling concept of “time travel,” an idea depicted in many a science fiction flick. The desire to “travel through time” throws light on the barriers our minds have erected to separate the past, present and future, and is just as imaginary as the concept of time itself. An accolade for one of our most bizarre time-related concepts however, I believe should be extended to the notion of the “time-out” in athletic events. Why not sweep under the rug the constructed concepts of time, the ideals that are indispensable in all other circumstances, if it enables our favorite team to score the winning point? The truth that most of us fail to understand is that time is eternal. In a rigorously paced, high-speed world, we are blinded from the reality that time lasts forever; it is only our *lifetime* that is limited. In essence, only time is timeless!

I cannot help but question why the intricacies of the human perception of time have been accepted, absurdities and all. Few are bold enough to protest the senselessness of time, those few being comedians. I clearly remember Mel Brooks’ puns on our daily use of words associated with time in his spoof *Spaceballs*. One of his characters poses the preposterous query, “When will *then* be *now*?” Not surprisingly, he is dished an equally ridiculous response of “Soon!” I also recall being amused by a particular scene in Billy Crystal’s film *Mr. Saturday Night*, in which Crystal is scheduling an appointment with a character who asks him, “How’s Friday?” Crystal’s reply is, “It’s just like today, but later.” At least we can thank someone for speaking the plain truth.

Comedians’ gibes are the only pieces of evidence I can find to attest to the fact that there are other individuals “taking the time” to question ideas that have become rote. Many of us simply “run out of time” to examine our speech and thoughts. On the whole, life in today’s United States and many communities abroad does not permit us to escape from our own invention of time. As the twenty-first century continues to unfold, we have not only created a world where our slavery to time is inevitable, but are now pushing the envelope to race against the clock. No longer are we satisfied to wait three days to receive information in the mail; we simply send a fax or an email with the punch of a button or the click of a mouse. In a civilization that craves instant-gratification, whether in terms of financial transactions or communication, speed has become the most valuable commodity. Our newly conceived definitions of the words “fast” and “slow” are resetting the biological clocks of younger generations.

My watch tells me that several hours have passed while I have been explaining every nuance of time, but I have numerous tasks to accomplish before the curtain comes down on February the fifth, two-thousand three. I better attend to these duties before I realize that I have wasted too much time.

Sarah Rachelle Dickens is a Syracuse University sophomore from Woodridge, New York. A member of the University Honors Program, she is currently majoring in International Relations with particular emphasis on Western Europe and the Middle East. Her primary interests are in politics, cultural studies, history, religion, and foreign languages. She is active as a tutor for the Learning Resource Center and a participant in Hillel Jewish Student Union. She is also Campus Leader for the Syracuse University chapter of Caravan for Democracy (CFD), a program that empowers students to engage in constructive dialogue and critical thinking about the Middle East by bringing prominent Israeli figures to speak on campuses across the United States.