

Time and Literature

Adam Barrows/Peter Watson



The dance to the music of time c. 1640
Nicolas Poussin - Unknown

For everything there is a season
And a time for every purpose under heaven:
A time to be born, and a time to die;
A time to plant, and a time to reap;
A time to kill, and a time to heal;
A time to break down, and a time to build up;
A time to weep, and a time to laugh;
A time to mourn, and a time to dance;
A time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together;

A time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;
A time to seek, and a time to lose;
A time to keep, and a time to throw away;
A time to tear, and a time to sew;
A time to keep silence, and a time to speak;
A time to love, and a time to hate,
A time for war, and a time for peace.
Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 (~ 300 BCE)

PW

Time in Literature

Aristotle demanded the three unities

- Unity of Space
- Unity of Time
- Unity of Action
- The first two are, of course, just physics.

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- Almost all writers assume an underlying 3-D space and time which flows in a linear fashion.
- Changing these totally destroys the story!
- e.g. The prisoner in the "Count of Monte Cristo" cannot escape his three-dimensional cell: trivial in a four-dimensional world, just as a child playing hop-scotch can step out of a square in two-dimensions
- What stories really satisfy the three unities?
- "High Noon"
- "Rope" (Hitchcock's retelling of the Leopold-Loeb case).

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Linear Model of Time

►linear stories

•e.g. "Oliver Twist" : space is England and the time Victorian, but the 3 dimensions of the space fail to be mentioned.

Chapter 1: Treats of the place where Oliver Twist was born, and of the circumstances attending his birth.

Among other public buildings in a certain town, which for many reasons it will be prudent to refrain from mentioning, and to which I will assign no fictitious name, there is one anciently common to most towns, great or small: to wit, a workhouse; and in this workhouse was born; on a day and date which I need not trouble myself to repeat, inasmuch as it can be of no possible consequence to the reader, in this stage of the business at all events; the item of mortality whose name is prefixed to the head of this chapter.

5

6

•compression of time: Philip Sydney grumbled about this 400 years ago:

•“Now of time they are much more liberal; for ordinary it is, that two young princes fall in love; after many traverses she is got with child; delivered of a fair boy; he is lost, groweth a man, falleth in love, and is ready to get another child; and all this in two hours' space; which, how absurd it is in sense, even sense may imagine;”
Philip Sidney

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Time in Literature

•flashback: inserts past time into present time.

In practice, a character relating what has happened to him in the past is almost the same author dropping the story back into the past.

•Either way the past is fixed: we have two or more threads of a story sequentially

•This 3-dimensional space and a linear time represent the physics framework of the vast majority of stories.

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The Greeks (ideas from Adam Barrows)

- Chronos: mundane time
- Kairos: life-changing events
- only Kairos is appropriate for literature: e.g Ulysses in “The Odyssey”
- Interest in Chronos comes later: e.g Leopold Bloom in “Ulysses”!
- e.g food and feasting

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The Odyssey

"They called her and she came down, unfastened the door, and bade them enter. They, thinking no evil, followed her, all except Eurylochus, who suspected mischief and staid outside. When she had got them into her house, she set them upon benches and seats and mixed them a mess with cheese, honey, meal, and Pramnian wine, but she drugged it with wicked poisons to make them forget their homes, and when they had drunk she turned them into pigs by a stroke of her wand, and shut them up in her pig-styes. They were like pigs—head, hair, and all, and they grunted just as pigs do; but their senses were the same as before, and they remembered everything.

"Thus then were they shut up squealing, and Circe threw them some acorns and beech masts such as pigs eat, but Eurylochus hurried back to tell me about the sad fate of our comrades. He was so overcome with dismay that though he tried to speak he could find no words to do so; his eyes filled with tears and he could only sob and sigh, till at last we forced his story out of him, and he told us what had happened to the others.

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Text

Ulysses (James Joyce, 1918)

A kidney oozed bloodgouts on the willowpatterned dish: the last. He stood by the nextdoor girl at the counter. Would she buy it too, calling the items from a slip in her hand? Chapped: washingsoda. And a pound and a half of Denny's sausages. His eyes rested on her vigorous hips. Woods his name is. Wonder what he does. Wife is oldish. New blood. No followers allowed. Strong pair of arms. Whacking a carpet on the clothesline. She does whack it, by George. The way her crooked skirt swings at each whack.

The ferretheaded porkbutcher folded the sausages he had snipped off with blotchy fingers, sausagepink. Sound meat there: like a stallfed heifer.

He took a page up from the pile of cut sheets: the model farm at Kinnereth on the lakeshore of Tiberias. Can become ideal winter sanatorium. Moses Montefiore. I thought he was. Farmhouse, wall round it, blurred cattle cropping. He held the page from him: interesting: read it nearer, the title, the blurred cropping cattle, the page rustling. A young white heifer. Those mornings in the cattlemarket, the beasts lowing in their pens, branded sheep, flop and fall of dung, the breeders in hobnailed boots trudging through the litter, slapping a palm on a ripemated hindquarter, there's a prime one, unpeeled switches in their hands. He held the page aslant patiently, bending his senses and his will, his soft subject gaze at rest. The crooked skirt swinging, whack by whack by whack.

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Text

The porkbutcher snapped two sheets from the pile, wrapped up her prime sausages and made a red grimace.

—Now, my miss, he said.

She tendered a coin, smiling boldly, holding her thick wrist out.

—Thank you, my miss. And one shilling threepence change. For you, please?

Mr Bloom pointed quickly. To catch up and walk behind her if she went slowly, behind her moving hams. Pleasant to see first thing in the morning. Hurry up, damn it. Make hay while the sun shines. She stood outside the shop in sunlight and sauntered lazily to the right. He sighed down his nose: they never understand. Sodachapped hands. Crusted toenails too. Brown scapulars in tatters, defending her both ways. The sting of disregard glowed to weak pleasure within his breast. For another: a constable off duty cuddling her in Eccles lane. They like them sizeable. Prime sausage. O please, Mr Policeman, I'm lost in the wood.

—Threepence, please.

His hand accepted the moist tender gland and slid it into a sidepocket. Then it fetched up three coins from his trousers' pocket and laid them on the rubber prickles. They lay, were read quickly and quickly slid, disc by disc, into the till.

PW

Prophecy/Prediction/Time Travel

- When do they mix?

13

Text

So what was the first story in which Time was used in a non-trivial way

- Oedipus?
- Macbeth?
- Christmas Carol?
- Time Machine?

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Oedipus Rex

Sophocles Translated by F. Storr

JOCASTA

..... An oracle
Once came to Laius
..... declaring he was doomed
To perish by the hand of his own son.....
As for the child, it was but three days old,
When Laius, its ankles pierced and pinned
Together, gave it to be cast away

Rescued by a shepherd, brought up as son, adopted by
Polybus & Merope (king and Queen of Corinth)

15

Text

OEDIPUS

.....Listen then.
My sire was Polybus of Corinth, and
My mother Merope, a Dorian;
.....
So privily without their leave I went
To Delphi, and Apollo sent me back
Baulked of the knowledge that I came to seek.
But other grievous things he prophesied,
Woes, lamentations, mourning, portents dire;
To wit I should defile my mother's bed
And raise up seed too loathsome to behold,
And slay the father from whose loins I sprang.

PW

OEDIPUS

..... a man who sat
In a car drawn by colts--as in thy tale--
.....the old man, seeing this,
Watched till I passed and from his car brought down
Full on my head the double-pointed goad.
Yet was I quits with him and more; one stroke
Of my good staff sufficed to fling him clean
Out of the chariot seat and laid him prone.
And so I slew them every one
.....
Yea with these hands all gory I pollute
The bed of him I slew.

Shakespeare

- Seems to have been obsessed by time

PW

Macbeth

MACBETH

Speak, if you can: what are you?

First Witch

All hail, Macbeth! hail to thee, thane of Glamis!

Second Witch

All hail, Macbeth, hail to thee, thane of Cawdor!

Third Witch

All hail, Macbeth, thou shalt be king hereafter!

PW

First Apparition

Macbeth! Macbeth! Macbeth! beware Macduff;
Beware the thane of Fife. Dismiss me. Enough.

MACBETH

Whate'er thou art, for thy good caution, thanks;
Thou hast harp'd my fear aright: but one word more,--

Second Apparition

Macbeth! Macbeth! Macbeth!
Be bloody, bold, and resolute; laugh to scorn
The power of man, for none of woman born
Shall harm Macbeth.

MACBETH

Then live, Macduff: what need I fear of thee?

Third Apparition

Macbeth shall never vanquish'd be until
Great Birnam wood to high Dunsinane hill
Shall come against him.

MACBETH

That will never be....

PW

SIWARD

What wood is this before us?

MENTEITH

The wood of Birnam.

MALCOLM

Let every soldier hew him down a bough
And bear't before him: thereby shall we shadow
The numbers of our host and make discovery
Err in report of us.

PW

MACBETH

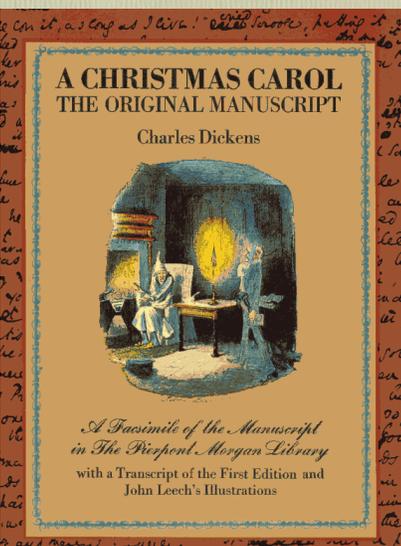
.....

I bear a charmed life, which must not yield,
To one of woman born.

MACDUFF

Despair thy charm;
And let the angel whom thou still hast served
Tell thee, Macduff was from his mother's womb
Untimely ripp'd.

PW



gutenberg.org

"Who, and what are you?" Scrooge demanded.

"I am the Ghost of Christmas Past."

"Long past?" inquired Scrooge: observant of its dwarfish stature.

"No. Your past."



PW

"Come in!" exclaimed the Ghost. "Come in! and know me better, man!"

Scrooge entered timidly, and hung his head before this Spirit. He was not the dogged Scrooge he had been; and though its eyes were clear and kind, he did not like to meet them.

"I am the Ghost of Christmas Present," said the Spirit. "Look upon me!"

.....

At last the dinner was all done, the cloth was cleared, the hearth swept, and the fire made up.Then all the Cratchit family drew round the hearth, in what Bob Cratchit called a circle, meaning half a one; and at Bob Cratchit's elbow stood the family display of glass; two tumblers, and a custard-cup without a handle.

These held the hot stuff from the jug, however, as well as golden goblets would have done; and Bob served it out with beaming looks, while the chesnuts on the fire sputtered and crackled noisily. Then Bob proposed:

"A Merry Christmas to us all, my dears. God bless us!"

Which all the family re-echoed.

"God bless us every one!" said Tiny Tim, the last of all

PW

"I am in the presence of the Ghost of Christmas Yet To Come?" said Scrooge.

The Spirit answered not, but pointed downward with its hand.

"You are about to show me shadows of the things that have not happened, but will happen in the time before us," Scrooge pursued. "Is that so, Spirit?"

Still the Ghost pointed downward to the grave by which it stood.

"Men's courses will foreshadow certain ends, to which, if persevered in, they must lead," said Scrooge. "But if the courses be departed from, the ends will change. Say it is thus with what you show me!"

The Spirit was immovable as ever.

Scrooge crept towards it, trembling as he went; and following the finger, read upon the stone of the neglected grave his own name, Ebenezer Scrooge.

"Am I that man who lay upon the bed?" he cried, upon his knees.

The finger pointed from the grave to him, and back again.

"No, Spirit! Oh no, no!"

The finger still was there.

PW

Scrooge was better than his word. He did it all, and infinitely more; and to Tiny Tim, who did NOT die, he was a second father. He became as good a friend, as good a master, and as good a man, as the good old city knew, or any other good old city, town, or borough, in the good old world. Some people laughed to see the alteration in him, but he let them laugh, and little heeded them; for he was wise enough to know that nothing ever happened on this globe, for good, at which some people did not have their fill of laughter in the outset; and knowing that such as these would be blind anyway, he thought it quite as well that they should wrinkle up their eyes in grins, as have the malady in less attractive forms. His own heart laughed: and that was quite enough for him.

He had no further intercourse with Spirits, but lived upon the Total Abstinence Principle, ever afterwards; and it was always said of him, that he knew how to keep Christmas well, if any man alive possessed the knowledge. May that be truly said of us, and all of us! And so, as Tiny Tim observed, God Bless Us, Every One!

PW

- Note
- Oedipus cannot change his future
- Macbeth chooses not to
- Scrooge does!

PW

Chronos and Kairos in Macbeth

SEYTON

The queen, my lord, is dead.

PW

Macbeth

To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
To the last syllable of recorded time;
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

30

Text

.....
SIWARD

.....Here comes newer comfort.

Re-enter *MACDUFF*, with *MACBETH's* head

PW

Perception of Time

- We are not very good ...
- e.g Shakespear, As You Like It

ROSALIND I pray you, what is't o'clock?

ORLANDO You should ask me what time o' day: there's no clock in the forest.

ROSALIND Then there is no true lover in the forest; else sighing every minute and groaning every hour would detect the lazy foot of Time as well as a clock.

ORLANDO And why not the swift foot of Time? had not that been as proper?

ROSALIND By no means, sir: Time travels in divers paces with divers persons. I'll tell you who Time ambles withal, who Time trots withal, who Time gallops withal and who he stands still withal.

ORLANDO Who doth he gallop withal?

ROSALIND With a thief to the gallows, for though he go as softly as foot can fall, he thinks himself too soon there.

ORLANDO Who stays it still withal?

ROSALIND With lawyers in the vacation, for they sleep between term and term and then they perceive not how Time moves.

ORLANDO I prithee, who doth he trot withal?

ROSALIND Marry, he trots hard with a young maid between the contract of her marriage and the day it is solemnized: if the interim be but a se'nnight, Time's pace is so hard that it seems the length of seven year.

ORLANDO Who ambles Time withal?

ROSALIND With a priest that lacks Latin and a rich man that hath not the gout, for the one sleeps easily because he cannot study, and the other lives merrily because he feels no pain, the one lacking the burden of lean and wasteful learning, the other knowing no burden of heavy tedious penury; these Time ambles withal.

SONNET 19

Devouring Time, blunt thou the lion's paws,
And make the earth devour her own sweet brood;
Pluck the keen teeth from the fierce tiger's jaws,
And burn the long-lived phoenix in her blood;
Make glad and sorry seasons as thou fleet'st,
And do whate'er thou wilt, swift-footed Time,
To the wide world and all her fading sweets;
But I forbid thee one most heinous crime:
O, carve not with thy hours my love's fair brow,
Nor draw no lines there with thine antique pen;
Him in thy course untainted do allow
For beauty's pattern to succeeding men.
Yet, do thy worst, old Time: despite thy wrong,
My love shall in my verse ever live young.

PW

To His Coy Mistress Andrew Marvell

Had we but world enough, and time,
This coyness, Lady, were no crime
We would sit down and think which way
To walk and pass our long love's day.
Thou by the Indian Ganges' side
Shouldst rubies find: I by the tide
Of Humber would complain. I would
Love you ten years before the Flood,
And you should, if you please, refuse
Till the conversion of the Jews.
My vegetable love should grow
Vaster than empires, and more slow;
An hundred years should go to praise
Thine eyes and on thy forehead gaze;
Two hundred to adore each breast,
But thirty thousand to the rest;
An age at least to every part,
And the last age should show your heart.

But at my back I always hear
Time's wingèd chariot hurrying near;
And yonder all before us lie
Deserts of vast eternity.
.....
Now let us sport us while we may,
And now, like amorous birds of prey,
Rather at once our time devour
Than languish in his slow-chapt power.
The grave's a fine and private place,
But none, I think, do there embrace.
.....
Thus, though we cannot make our sun
Stand still, yet we will make him run.

Did it work?

Peter Watson

The Time Machine, by H. G. Wells [1898]

The Time Traveller (for so it will be convenient to speak of him) was expounding a recondite matter to us. '... You must follow me carefully. I shall have to controvert one or two ideas that are almost universally accepted. The geometry, for instance, they taught you at school is founded on a misconception.'

'Is not that rather a large thing to expect us to begin upon?' said Filby, an argumentative person with red hair.

'I do not mean to ask you to accept anything without reasonable ground for it. You will soon admit as much as I need from you. You know of course that a mathematical line, a line of thickness *nil*, has no real existence. They taught you that? Neither has a mathematical plane. These things are mere abstractions.'

'That is all right,' said the Psychologist.

'Nor, having only length, breadth, and thickness, can a cube have a real existence.'

'There I object,' said Filby. 'Of course a solid body may exist. All real things—'

'So most people think. But wait a moment. Can an *instantaneous* cube exist?'

'Don't follow you,' said Filby.

'Can a cube that does not last for any time at all, have a real existence?'

PW

... 'We are always getting away from the present moment. Our mental existences, which are immaterial and have no dimensions, are passing along the Time-Dimension with a uniform velocity from the cradle to the grave. Just as we should travel *down* if we began our existence fifty miles above the earth's surface.'

'But the great difficulty is this,' interrupted the Psychologist. 'You *can* move about in all directions of Space, but you cannot move about in Time.'

'That is the germ of my great discovery. But you are wrong to say that we cannot move about in Time. For instance, if I am recalling an incident very vividly I go back to the instant of its occurrence: I become absent-minded, as you say. I jump back for a moment.'

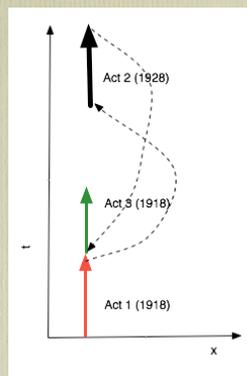
PW

'So I travelled, stopping ever and again, in great strides of a thousand years or more, drawn on by the mystery of the earth's fate, watching with a strange fascination the sun grow larger and duller in the westward sky, and the life of the old earth ebb away. At last, **more than thirty million years hence**, the huge red-hot dome of the sun had come to obscure nearly a tenth part of the darkling heavens. Then I stopped once more, for the crawling multitude of crabs had disappeared, and the red beach, save for its livid green liverworts and lichens, seemed lifeless. And now it was flecked with white. A bitter cold assailed me. Rare white flakes ever and again came eddying down. To the north-eastward, the glare of snow lay under the starlight of the sable sky and I could see an undulating crest of hillocks pinkish white. There were fringes of ice along the sea margin, with drifting masses further out; but the main expanse of that salt ocean, all bloody under the eternal sunset, was still unfrozen.'

PW

e.g. Three Time Plays by J. B Priestley:
"Time and the Conways"

Spoiler Alert!
Plots will be revealed



Dangerous Corner

Darkness, a shot, lights

Freda, Olwen, Miss Maud and Betty are listening to the radio

....Stanton, Gordon (Betty) & Robert (Freda) enter

Gordon (*Beginning to fiddle with the radio*): What's on the ether tonight?

Freda: Oh Gordon, don't start it again. We've only just turned it off

Gordon: What did you hear?

Freda: The last half of a play.

Olwen: It was called "the Sleeping Dog"

Stanton: Why?

Miss M: We're not sure- something to do with lies

Olwen: You know, I believe I understand that play now. The sleeping dog was the truth, and ..the husband insisted on disturbing it.

.....

Betty: Oh but one has to. I'm always fibbing. I do it all day long

Gordon (*still fiddling with the wireless*): You do, darling, you do

Robert runs out to commit suicide

Darkness, a shot, lights

Freda, Owen, Miss Maud and Betty are listening to the radio

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.....

Gordon (*who has been fiddling with the wireless*) Wait a minute, listen to this
Curtain falls as they dance to "Can't we talk it over"

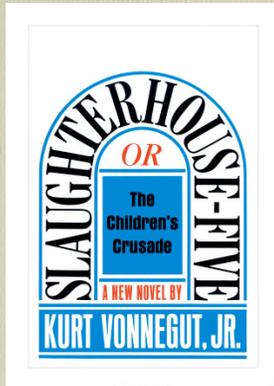
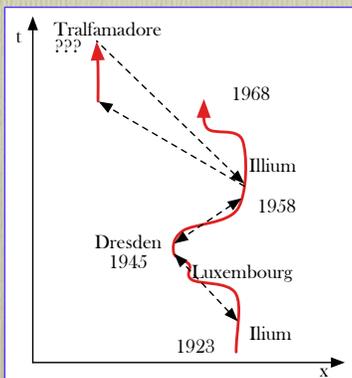
An Inspector Calls: Synopsis:

- A wealthy family (the Birlings) are celebrating the engagement of their daughter to Gerald Croft.
- Inspector Goole calls, investigating the horrifying suicide (by drinking disinfectant) of one Eva Smith.
- Reveals that ALL the family (unknowingly) had a hand in her death.
- The inspector leaves and Gerald phones the hospital: no girl has committed suicide.
- They celebrate the hoax, the phone rings: a girl has been found dead and an inspector is on his way round....

Slaughterhouse-Five:

by Kurt Vonnegut (1969) So it goes

Billy Pilgrim has become unstuck in time



It was a movie about American bombers in the Second World War and the gallant men who flew them. Seen backwards by Billy, the story went like this:

American planes, full of holes and wounded men and corpses took off backwards from an airfield in England. Over France, a few German fighter planes flew at them backwards, sucked bullets and shell fragments from some of the planes and crewmen. They did the same for wrecked American bombers on the ground, and those planes flew up backwards to join the formation.

The formation flew backwards over a German city that was in flames. The bombers opened their bomb bay doors, exerted a miraculous magnetism which shrunk the fires, gathered them into cylindrical steel containers, and lifted the containers into the bellies of the planes. The containers were stored neatly in racks. The Germans below had miraculous devices of their own, which were long steel tubes. They used them to suck more fragments from the crewmen and planes. But there were still a few wounded Americans, and some of the bombers were in bad repair. Over France, though, German fighters came up again, made everything and everybody as good as new.

When the bombers got back to their base, the steel cylinders were taken from the racks and shipped back to the United States of America, where factories were operating night and day, dismantling the cylinders, separating the dangerous contents into minerals. Touchingly, it was mainly women who did this work. The minerals were then shipped to specialists in remote areas. It was their business to put them into the ground, to hide them cleverly, so they would never hurt anybody ever again.

Note morality is reversed if time is reversed!

Free will doesn't exist

"Out of 31 inhabited planets I have visited, only on Earth is there any talk of free will."

Vonnegut, Slaughterhouse Five

From *Time's Arrow* by Martin Amis (1991)

But we passed again, later, and the hands hadn't moved to an earlier time. How could they move? They were painted, and would never move to an earlier time. Beneath the clock was an enormous arrow, on which was printed: change here for Eastern trains. But time had no arrow, not here.

Indeed, at the railway station in Treblinka, the four dimensions were intriguingly displaced. A place without depth. And a place without time.