



Time Travel Narratives

An Overview
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Origins:

- According to Larry Niven in “The Theory and Practice of Time Travel” the origins of time travel can be found within fairytales:

Once upon a time a man was given three wishes. He blew the first two, getting himself in such deep trouble that if he let either wish stand, he would suffer terribly. Now desperate, he cried, “I wish I’d never *had* a fairy godmother!” And the past healed to cancel both wishes.

Niven. All the Myriad Ways. 110.



Beyond Fairytales

- No overall consensus of who wrote the first time travel story
- A number of early narratives contain “Time Travel Elements” and “Alternate Dimensions”



Examples:

- Alice slips through the rabbit hole into a sordid Wonderland where the Queen of Hearts speaks backwards (Lewis Carroll, *Alice In Wonderland*, 1865 and *Through the Looking Glass*, 1871)
- A rabbit hole and mirror serve as doorways into an alternate reality – a fanciful universe
- *Gulliver's Travels* by Jonathan Swift, first published 1726
- Gulliver is a surgeon who returns to England after a long disappearance with stories of far away unusual worlds



- *Memoirs of the Twentieth Century* (1733) by Samuel Madden
- The story is told via a series of letters from English ambassadors in various countries to the British “Lord High Treasurer” apparently written in 1997 and 1998 and describe that future era.
- These letters were actual documents given to the narrator by his guardian angel one night in 1728
- Paul Alkon suggests in his book *Origins of Futuristic Fiction* that “the first time-traveler in English literature is a guardian angel who returns with state documents from 1998 to the year 1728”
- Alkon later writes “It would be stretching our generosity to praise Madden for being the first to show a traveler arriving *from* the future”, but Madden “deserves recognition as the first to toy with the rich idea of time-travel in the form of an artifact sent backwards from the future to be discovered in the present.”



- Louis-Sébastien Mercier's *L'An 2440, rêve s'il en fut jamais* "The Year 2440: A Dream If Ever There Was One"
- A utopian novel set in the year 2440
- Published in 1771
- adventures of a man who falls asleep and finds himself in a Paris of the future
- Similarly *Rip Van Winkle* by Washington Irving published in 1819, a Dutchman named Rip falls asleep for twenty years



- Charles Dickens' 1843 book *A Christmas Carol* where Scrooge is taken by spirits to visit his past, present and shown a vision of his future
- Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889)
- However the credit must go to HG Wells for introducing a novel entirely focused on time and traversing through time intentionally - - powered by science and man in *The Time Machine*



By Machine or By Power?

- Most narratives can fall under two broad categories
 1. Time travel through a scientific vehicle created by man or . . .
 2. Time travel through some other psychic ability or supernatural power
- The first is intentional time travel while the second option can sometimes result in accidental time travel
- The first is considered a Science Fiction story while the second is categorized as fantasy

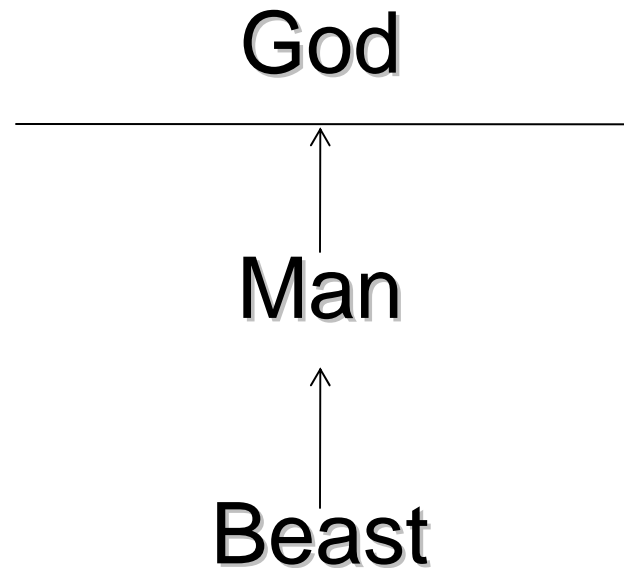


The Great Chain of Being

- *The Great Chain of Being* is a classical and western medieval conception of the order of the universe
- “A powerful visual metaphor for a divinely inspired universal hierarchy ranking all forms of higher and lower life” Example: <http://www.stanford.edu/class/enq174b/chain.html>



The Chain



The beast can become man and man struggles toward divinity. Similarly, gods have the power to transform to both man and beast. Man can also descend to the level of a beast. However, in much classical and pre-classical mythology man's own weakness will somehow inhibit him from ever being a god.



How does this relate to the Time Travel?

- Time travel is a “god-like power”
- In the texts and movies and TV shows we will primarily encounter within this class, there is some form of negative consequence ascribed to the time traveler as a result of his ability to time travel
- He is in some way inhibited from fully exerting that god-like power or incomplete



Time Traveler's Limitations

- As we progress in this class, pay attention to the time travelers and how they are portrayed.
- What is the personal cost for their great abilities?



Isolation

The time traveler is often isolated from his/her “present” time or from any lasting relationships with others because of his/her impermanence (his/her ability to move throughout time)

The role of the companion consequently becomes important



The Companion

- HG Wells's time traveler laments "If only I had had a companion it would have been different" (60).
- The Doctor in the TV series *Doctor Who* regularly has different companions each season but nevertheless always has one.



What is the role of the Companion?

- The companion often saves the time traveler from his/her own isolation
- Can also act as a moral compass
- Without a companion, the time traveler is often seen as struggling or suffering - lost

Responsibility

Consider as we read:

- If the time traveler intentionally travels into the past or future, what is their obligation to time itself? Do they have the right to alter events?



Motivations

- What are the reasons for time travel?
- Some themes reappear:
 - *Taking technology to the past*: a visitor brings future knowledge for either good or evil or accidentally
 - *Guardian of Time*: a select group are charged to protect “time” ensuring other time traveler’s do not mess things up, that time turns out properly (example: the Doctor)
 - *Unintentional change*: time traveler intends only to observe but unintentionally altered or created events with their presence (example: *Noein*)
 - *Love*: time traveler can travel through time in search of “perfect love” (example: *Somewhere in Time*)
 - *Rescue or right a wrong*: time traveler intends to save someone/thing in the hopes of stopping future catastrophic results (example: *Donnie Darko*)
 - *To fulfill destiny*: time traveler is destined for greatness but must somehow travel in order to fulfill that potential (example: *Bill and Ted’s Excellent Adventure*)





“The **time travel** motif also has an ideological function because it literally provides the necessary distancing effect that science fiction needs to be able to metaphorically address the most pressing issues and themes that concern people in the present. If the modern world is one where the individuals feel alienated and powerless in the face of bureaucratic structures and corporate monopolies, then time travel suggests that Everyman and Everybody is important to shaping history, to making a real and quantifiable difference in the way the world [comes about].” —Sean Redmond, *Liquid Metal: The Science Fiction Film Reader* (2004)