



Mythopoeic Society

mythLORE

A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis,
Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature

Volume 21
Number 3

Article 6

Summer 7-15-1996

Time Travel

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Recommended Citation

Beare, Rhona (1996) "Time Travel," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 21 : No. 3 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol21/iss3/6>

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Abstract

Relates various examples of time travel and time distortion in literature. Asks why no travel stories (excepting fantasies) were written before the 19th century if the desire for such stories is as “primordial” as Tolkien says.

Additional Keywords

Time travel

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RHONA BEARE

H.G. Wells in 1895 published *The Time Machine*, The traveler seats himself in the machine and travels faster and faster through time till he reaches the year 802,701 A.D. The human race has evolved into two distinct sub-species. He then travels into a still more remote future, where the sun has become a red giant, and the earth has stopped rotating. He returns to the year 1895, describes his adventures to his friends, and then sets off again, perhaps into the past. He does not return. A great many time travel stories have been written since then, but few have a machine. In Charles Williams' *Many Dimensions*, an archaeologist gets hold of the crown of King Solomon. The jewel in the crown has magic powers: it enables you to travel in time, space, or thought. Somebody travels half an hour into the future; somebody else travels a few hours into the past. Neither knows how to return to the present. Those who use the jewel are likely to meet a violent death.

Tolkien wrote a time-travel story, which has recently been published. Alboin Errol finds that words from strange languages keep coming into his mind; in one of them the word for 'tree' is *alda*, in another it is *galadth*. One evening he looks at the clouds, and a sentence comes to him: "They look like the eagles of the Lord of the West, coming upon Numenor". He does not know what the words mean, but Numenor sounds like a real place. He longs "to go back; to walk in Time, perhaps, as men walk on long roads; or to survey it, as men may see the world from a mountain, or the earth as a living map beneath an airship. But in any case to see with eyes and to hear with ears. One night he dreams a passage of Quenya describing the fall of Numenor. He says: "I wish there was a Time-machine. But Time is not to be conquered by machine. And I should go back, not forward; and I think backwards would be more possible." In his sleep he hears the voice of his remote ancestor. Elendil of Numenor, who offers him the chance to go back. The name Elendil and the name Albain both mean elf friend. When he rinds himself in Numenor he has become Elendil. Elendil's home looks to him both beloved and strange, for he sees it with Elendil's eyes and with Albain's. He witnesses the downfall of Numenor. Then he finds himself back in twentieth century England, and the clock is saying exactly the same time as when he went from England to Numenor.

In the Narnia stories, children leave England and find themselves in Narnia; have adventures lasting for months; and return to England at the exact hour in which they left. The time-scale in Narnia is independent of the time-scale in this world. The returning at the very minute when you set out can be paralleled in the Arabian Nights,¹ but it is not clear whether you travel to a world that (like Narnia)

is real. For instance: a sorcerer tells a vizier to plunge into a magic cauldron full of water. Immediately the vizier finds himself in the sea, and on coming to land discovers that he has been turned into a woman. He (or she) marries and becomes mother of seven children. Tiring of the life, she flings herself into the sea, and comes up again in the cauldron, once more a man. The vizier finds that he has really been absent only a few seconds. Were the marriage and the seven children only a dream? It takes only a few moments to dream of experiences that *seem* to take a long time.

But elsewhere in the Arabian Nights a Sheik causes the King of Egypt to have the same sort of experience, in order to convince him that the story of Mohammed's Ascension is *true*.

One day the doctors of the law were assembled in the Council of the King of Egypt and were talking of Mohammed's Ascension: "God showed him the seven heavens, the eight paradises, and the seven hells, and spoke with him 90,000 words; and when he returned to his place he found his bed still warm, and the water had not wholly run out of a jug which had been upset beside him." The King of Egypt did not believe this story. So a Sheik filled a tub with water and told the King to plunge into it. When the King raised his head above the water he saw himself between a mountain and the sea. He told woodcutters he was a shipwrecked merchant, went to their city, married, and in the course of seven years had three children. When he had spent all his wife's money, he took a job as a porter. One day he bathed in the sea, and when he raised his head above the water he found himself in his own palace, and the Sheik was looking at him.

In the old ballad of Thomas Rhymer. True Thomas was carried off to fairyland by the queen of the fairies.² When it was time for him to leave, he said "I have only been here three days," and she answered "You have been here more than three years." When Tolkien was writing *The Lord of the Rings* and had brought the Company to Lórien, he toyed with the idea that they spent a month in Lórien, but found when they left that no time at all had passed in the outside world. Alternatively, time might travel faster in the outside world. When they have left, Strider says "Whether we were in the past or the future I cannot say." This was altered in the published version.

Ogier the Dane spent 200 years with Morgan le Fay and thought it was twenty years. A monk listened to the song of a bird for three hours, as he supposed: it turned out to be 300 years. In Tolkien's *The Silmarillion*, when Thingol Greycloak heard nightingales and met Melian, "a spell




was laid on him, so that they stood thus while long years were measured by the wheeling stars above them."

This trance, in which you grow no older, is rather like a magic sleep. Rip Van Winkle was not the first: in the 6th century B.C. Epimenides the Cretan sheltered in a cave from the noon day heat and fell asleep for 57 years.³ When he returned home nobody recognized him. At the end of the 6th century Gregory of Tours wrote of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus.⁴ About 250 A.D., when Christians were being persecuted under Decius, seven Christians of Ephesus look refuge in a nearby cave. Their pursuers found them, and walled up the entrance to starve them to death. But they fell asleep, and woke nearly 200 years later, in the reign of Theodosius II. They supposed that they had slept a single night. One of them went secretly into the city to buy food, and was amazed to see the cross erected on churches and other buildings. He went to a baker's to buy bread, but when he produced a coin with the head of the long-dead emperor Decius he was arrested, and nobody believed his cave where he had left his six companions. The seven were taken to the emperor Theodosius, who said their story was proof of life after death. They fell asleep again, and will not wake till Judgment Day.

Eleven years before Wells wrote *The Time Machine*, Edward Bellamy wrote *Looking Backward*. In the year 1887 a man falls asleep, and sleeps for 113 years without growing older. He wakes in the year 2000 and finds a perfectly planned society, without poverty or crime. He falls asleep and finds himself back in the year 1887 with all its sordid problems; but fortunately that is only a dream, and he wakes up again in the year 2000.

William Morris loathed the planned society of that book. The socialist revolution that Morris dreamed of was going to produce quite a different sort of world. In 1886 he wrote *A Dream of John Ball*, about a modern man finding himself back in the Middle Ages, the year of the Peasants' Revolt. He meets John Ball, and tells him how the revolt will end, and what England will be like in the year 1886. If we decide that the conversation really took place, then this is time travel. Four years later Morris wrote *News from Nowhere*. A modern man longs to see what England will be like after the socialist revolution which is going to abolish poverty and the class system. One morning he wakes up in the future. There is no oppression or ugliness; everyone is cheerful and friendly. He lives happily among them, but always feels a visitor. Then One day he finds himself back in his old bed, wondering if that glimpse of the future was a dream, but more inclined to believe that he really had met those people, and the world was going to be like that one day. That story was written five years before *The Time Machine*, but it seems to me to be about real time travel into the future and back. Earlier, in 1856, Morris had written a story that could be taken as a dream or as real travel into the past. It is said that in the Middle Ages while the Lord of a castle was away, his servants dressed up a pig in a nightcap and nightshirt, bandaged its head, and sent for a

catholic priest, saying their Lord had been wounded and wanted to receive the last sacrament. In Morris' *Lindenbora Pool*, a modern man finds himself turned into that priest, witnesses the sacrilege and the miracle that punishes it.

There is a special kind of Time Travel in Kipling's *Puck of Pook's Hill*. Puck brings people out of the past to speak to two modern children.⁵ This may be what the devil does for Faustus when he asks to have Helen of Troy as his mistress. But some people think Faustus only gets a sham Helen. Apart from Faustus, I do not know any story of time travel earlier than the 19th century. Yet Tolkien in his essay on fairy stories (in *Tree and Leaf*) says that the desire "to survey the depths of space and time" is one of the "primordial human desires" that magic exists to satisfy. Wells' Time Machine (something like a car, something like a bicycle) Tolkien calls "preposterous and incredible," but he likes the journey to the remote future in which the human race has evolved into two subspecies. He says these subspecies "live far away, in an abyss of time so deep as to work an enchantment upon them." If he is right in thinking that stories of time travel satisfy a primordial human desire, why was no such story written till the 19th century? 

Notes

- 1 "The Tale of the Warlock and the young Cook of Baghdad," edited by Burton, *Supp. Nights* Vol. VI p. 137 and p. 246. Compare *Indian Tales* by Elizabeth Sharpe, London, 1939. In the first story the king of India mounts a horse and dreams that he rides to a distant village, marries, has many children, and eventually dies. He wakes to find himself still seated on the horse, and his courtiers know that only two minutes have passed. The king sends a messenger to find the village of which he had dreamed; the messenger there finds the old father-in-law, sees the dead body of the king, and pays for funeral. In these stories time travel does not mean traveling into a different century in order to see what life was like in the brave days of old. The idea of such a journey did occur to the Roman poet Horace about 33 B.C. His slave says to him (*Satires* 11.7.24) "You are always talking about the brave days of old, but if some god invited you to go back into the past you would refuse."
- 2 F.J. Child, *The English and Scottish Ballads*, Vol. 1 p. 321, p. 328: Thomas Rhymer, Ogier the Dane.
- 3 Diogenes Laertius, Bk. 1 Ch. 10. section 109: Epimenides of Crete. When he was a boy his father sent him to look for a stray sheep. He fell asleep in a cave and woke 57 years later, thinking he had slept only a short time. Failing to find the sheep, he went to the family farm, and found a new owner in possession. He returned to the town, to his father's house, and nobody recognized him. At last he found his younger brother, now an old man, and discovered what had happened. So he became famous throughout Greece and was thought to be dear to the gods. That is why the Athenians asked him to purify their city from plague and blood-guilt about the year 596 B.C.
- 4 Gregory of Tours, *Miraculorum Liber* Ch. 92 The story is in *Chambers' Encyclopedia*.
- 5 Compare Lucian's "Philosophies for Sale," in which the gods sell to men various philosophies, each taking the form of the founder of the school. That means that philosophers of different centuries (-Pythagoras, Socrates and others) are present as living men in i same sale room. See Volume two of the Loeb edition of Lucian. He wrote in the second century A.D.