

# Deconstructed Timeline: The New Figure of Time in “Burnt Norton” and “Slaughterhouse-Five”

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## Abstract

The following work draws a comparison between the images and symbols of time in T. S. Eliot’s “Burnt Norton” and Kurt Vonnegut’s “Slaughterhouse-Five.” In spite of the texts’ different genres, styles and background, they express similar sentiments, and they match the use of several symbols. By doing so, they develop noticeably analogous concepts, such as ever-present time, the ambivalent relationship of humanity with the realm of possibility, and the overestimation of death.

**Key words:** time, possibility, death, humanity, experience, T. S. Eliot, Vonnegut

## Resumen

En este artículo se hace una comparación entre las imágenes y símbolos del tiempo en “Burnt Norton” de T. S. Eliot y “Slaughterhouse-Five” de Kurt Vonnegut. A pesar de los géneros, estilos y trasfondos diferentes de los textos, ambos expresan opiniones similares y concuerdan en el uso de varios símbolos. Al hacer esto, desarrollan conceptos notablemente análogos, tales como el tiempo presente perpetuo, la relación ambivalente de la humanidad con el reino de la posibilidad y la sobrevaloración de la muerte.

**Palabras claves:** tiempo, posibilidad, muerte, humanidad, experiencia, T. S. Eliot, Vonnegut

The Western world had a solid concept of time, a lineal sequence of cause and effect, which changed in the aftermath of World War I. As world superpowers crumbled, so did humanity's compliance with the rigid worldviews they represented. Thus came the Modernists to deconstruct all concepts stagnated by society's power structures, and authors, such as Faulkner and Woolf, sought to break the traditional notion of time with their – then – experimental texts. A short time after, the traditional timeline took another blow in the form of World War II. Lineal logic was in a stalemate as Europe destroyed itself once again; thus, just as Modernists were challenging lineal time, time proved to be transparently circular. According to Daniel Corrie, this shift during the twentieth century strongly shook the scientific community to the point where physicists, such as Albert Einstein, proposed time as a four-dimensional concept (64). Similarly, writers began to conceptualize and depict new constructions of time to make sense of the world, and some proved to be strikingly similar in spite of their contexts. For instance, the main themes and images of time in T. S. Eliot's "Burnt Norton" manifest thoroughly in Kurt Vonnegut's "Slaughterhouse-Five."

Both texts conceptualize time as ever-present, yet it manifests in slightly different ways. The determining factor behind this distinction is the notion of temporality. In "Burnt Norton" time is always present: "time present and time past / are both perhaps present in time future / and time future contained in time past" (1-3). However, the use of "present" in line two as both noun and

adjective creates blatant ambivalence. As a noun, the present and past are understood to be present time in the future. Furthermore, since the future is contained in the past, the circle is then completed, and all time is proven to be in the present. This conclusion is also reached by reading "present" as an adjective: the past and present both manifest and are present in the future. In other words, regardless of the reading, either path reaches the same destination. Hence, time is ever-present. In turn, "Slaughterhouse-Five" depicts time as a similar concept, albeit in a different manner. An alien race, the Tralfamadorians, teaches the protagonist, Billy Pilgrim, that time is simultaneous. They are able to perceive time as a fourth dimension, not as a progression of events. For them, humans appear like centipede-like beings, with baby features on one end and elderly features on the other (403). Additionally, they are still able to perceive a being after it dies as death does not erase the being from existence; the being still exists, has, and always will throughout time (362). This idea strongly echoes Eliot's, yet it goes a step further by adding a human explanation for a non-human perspective. Scientifically, Corrie states that some physicists had also adopted this interpretation of time as "a collage, where the collage's 'pictured' events in some way linger; they leave the pattern of their scattered trail through three dimensions, the pattern of which might be regarded in its entirety from some imagined, humanly unobtainable four-dimensional perspective" (64). In "Slaughterhouse-Five," the Tralfamadorians possess this humanly impossible point-of-view. Furthermore, Vonnegut states in the

novel that he styled the narration in Tralfamadorian fashion: "We Tralfamadorians read [the clump of symbols] at once, not one after the other. There isn't any particular relationship between the messages, except that the author has chosen them carefully, so that, when seen all at once, they produce an image of life that is beautiful and surprising and deep" (403-404). For Vonnegut, time is ever-present since all points in time are constantly occurring; one moment does not supersede the other.

Ultimately, both conceptualizations of ever-present time lead to the same conclusion in both texts: time is presented as a pre-made route. In "Burnt Norton" one cannot alter time: "if all time is eternally present / all time is unredeemable" (4-5). The lines have a fatalist tone because they voice the sentiment of times: humanity cannot focus on faded glory or possible greatness since what only matters is the present. Similarly, the Tralfamadorians confide in Billy they are fully aware that they will accidentally bring forth the end of the universe. Billy asked them why they did not prevent the event; they simply responded that it has already happened in the future, so it is and has always been such (Vonnegut 423). Time is thus presented as a fixed plan which cannot be altered because it is either doomed to repeat itself or because it has already happened in the future. Ultimately, both texts present that humanity's main source of grief comes from the inability to detach itself from such events, and from the illusion of control.

Both texts claim that humanity fools itself with the idea of possibility, and, accordingly, Billy Pilgrim struggles to find comfort as a fixed point in

the center of time. When humanity is lead to believe that they control their destiny, this creates the realm of possibility. In this place of endless potential, humanity clings to whatever they believe defines them and their fate. On one hand, in "Burnt Norton" this realm is represented by the rose garden: "down the passage which we did not take / towards the door we never opened / into the rose-garden" (12-14). Actually, the garden proves to be a personal symbol for Eliot. Corrie reports that Eliot once walked through a garden with his first love while thinking about his recently filed divorce with another woman. Corrie further states that "as they walked together, [Eliot] must have emotionally contemplated how different choices would have avoided great anguish" (66-67). This place, as stated by the quote and by Corrie, is created by clinging to the past. While different decisions would have certainly taken people down different roads in their lives, the fact of the matter is that the choice has already been made, and the present has thus been sealed. Occupying one's mind with what could have been proves to be a fruitless endeavor, and the persona in "Burnt Norton" makes the same assertion: "but to what purpose / disturbing the dust on a bowl of rose-leaves / I do not know (15-17). The answer to the persona's question is actually given in "Slaughterhouse-Five." The Tralfamadorians have created a bleak analogy to understand the human perspective of time: "[Billy's] head was encased in a steel sphere which he could never take off. There was only one eyehole through which he could look, and welded to that eye hole were six feet of pipe . . . . He didn't know he was on a flatcar . . . . It sometimes crept,

sometimes went extremely fast, often stopped” (422). For them, humans were born into a pitiful position that restricted them from seeing the grand scheme. For humans, however, that limited point of view was the whole scope of life. Additionally, they cannot perceive that they are being driven down a constructed path. Thus, humanity believes that it possesses some degree of control over their existence, so the realm of possibility is created. In the end, the illusion of control proves to be nothing but, and it becomes a source of grief.

Because of the restricted perspective humans have of time, the mind easily wanders off into the realm of possibility. The guise of control gives the impression that, had different decisions been made, life would naturally be better. Leonard Mustazza accurately identifies that Vonnegut’s world, for instance, “is a world in which human beings are essentially slaves to forces they cannot (or, in some cases, will not) control...” (qtd. in Morse 399). As more decisions are made in a lifetime, their consequences become more uncontrollable since time is irreversible. Therefore, while they have traditionally symbolized freedom, hope, and good things to come, Eliot and Vonnegut employ birds as a symbolic guide to remind the characters not to stray from reality. Furthermore, to add richness to their meaning, the naturally fleeting behavior of birds parallels the uncontrollable nature of time. In the first section of “Burnt Norton,” the thrush plays a significant part in guiding the persona through the rose garden. It acts as a Beatrice-like figure that, as in Dante’s text, urges the persona to move forward: “Other echoes / inhabit

the garden. Shall we follow? / Quick, said the bird, find them, find them (18-20). In this case, the bird can be interpreted as an advisor for the personae, warning them of the perils of wandering too far into the realm of possibility. This idea is further strengthened later in the section: “Go, go, go, said the bird: human kind / Cannot bear very much reality” (42-43). This ushering out of rose garden is the bird’s way of protection. It knows that, since reality is oftentimes hard to bear, humanity is prone to wander off into possibility. Thus, the personae cannot stay there longer for their own sake. In “Slaughterhouse-Five,” the bird symbol is not as prominent, but it does play a similar role. Its first appearance in the frame story functions as statement of the absurdity of war: “...there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre ... And what do the birds say? All there is to say about a massacre, things like ‘Poo-tee-weet?’” (357). Thus, the bird serves as a harsh wake-up call to reality. It is a reminder that not only is destruction senseless, but also that time continues to move forward. Sometime after the firebombing of Dresden, Billy and a group of soldiers emerge from a stable to realize the war was over: “Billy and the rest wandered out onto the shady street. The trees were leafing out. There was nothing going on out there, no traffic of any kind ... The birds were talking. One bird said to Billy Pilgrim, ‘Poo-tee-weet?’” (490). Shortly after, the group finds a wagon and travels into the city. Thus, as the thrush in “Burnt Norton,” this bird urges Billy not to wander in this seemingly timeless realm. As there is no point in wondering about the lost possibilities of those who died, it wakes Billy up from the

stupor of the destruction into reality. The existence of these bird symbols give proof that humanity needs a constant reminder of the dangers of time. However, another reading of the same symbols offers an opposite perspective.

In order to further stress humanity's predicament with the realm of possibility, the songbirds ambiguously function as not only symbols of guidance, but also of deceit. The dualistic nature of these symbols accurately reflects the ambivalent relationship humanity has with time and possibility. On the one hand, humanity is thankful towards the birds who wake them and guide them back to the grim, yet safer waters of reality. On the other hand, possibility constantly tempts humanity back, and in these cases, the bird acts as the snake. In "Burnt Norton," the persona is actually seemingly aware of the bird's misleading actions: "Through the first gate, / into our first world, shall we follow / the deception of the thrush? Into our first world" (20-22). The choice phrasing of "deception" bluntly proves the bird's intentions, as the realm of possibility is ultimately a lie. Referring to this realm as "out first world" highlights the precarious relationship humanity has with it. Instead of accepting its choices and consequences, humanity would much rather focus first on what could have been, before finally coming to terms with reality. The thrush knows this fully well, so, in a twisted act of kindness, it pushes humanity further into the rose garden to protect it. Thus, the lines "go, go, go, said the bird: human kind / cannot bear very much reality" completely change in tone and intent. The bird in "Slaughterhouse-Five," while not as explicitly ambivalent,

does distract Billy from reality, as well. In the aftermath of the destruction of Dresden, Billy and the soldiers find that "there was only one vehicle, an abandoned wagon drawn by two horses" (490) just as they were hearing the birds chirping. Even though the birds did make Billy focus on reality, they decided to take the wagon "back to the slaughterhouse for souvenirs of the war" (476). In other words, the chirping bird actually distracted Billy and the others from internalizing the reality of the destruction, and it made them focus on material possessions to validate their time at war. Coleman claims that because of Billy Pilgrim's insensibility to temporal relations, the past is lost to him; he is blind to the present, and the future is wholly inscrutable, bringing good fortune or pain unaccountably and mysteriously" (668). Because of Billy's erratic movement through his timeline, he proves to be more susceptible to detachment and distraction than those whose experiences are contextualized. Thus, the chirping bird simply forced him to quickly find his temporal bearings and to act upon them. In short, in spite of the birds' dualistic function as symbols, in a way they represent humanity's whims and their constant state of flux. Humanity has a love-hate relationship with the realm of possibility because of the importance given to the construct of time, which only creates anxiety and suffering in the end.

In fact, both texts prove that letting go of the construct of time itself brings forth peace. Firstly, "Burnt Norton" employs the wheel of life as a symbol of humanity's fixation on time. From the center of the wheel "there would be no dance, and there is only the dance.

/ I can only say, there we have been: but I cannot say where. / And I cannot say, how long, for that is to place it in time" (67-69). Being in the center of the wheel allows one to detach oneself from the alleged importance of time and space. Humanity (over)values events because it believes they have a transcendent significance. However, this belief causes pain when such events and experiences are not achieved. Similarly, Billy values experiences by placing them in time. When he first became unstuck in time, he frantically tried to find himself along his timeline (Vonnegut 375). He continues this behavior throughout his life, to a lesser or greater degree of specificity. He sometimes pinpoints an event in a specific year; some other times he places them in a general situation, such as, his time working as an optometrist or his stay in the hospital after his plane crash. Billy's attitude undoubtedly changes after his time in Tralfamadore. He learns to simply appreciate his life, regardless if it breaks away from the limited human way of perceiving time. Naturally, however, people clashed with Billy once he went public regarding his newfound knowledge because it shattered the established notion and value of not only life, but also death.

As a concept, death can be defined as to cease to exist in time. As such, at one point, both texts employ passenger trains as symbols of timelessness as a setting for the characters to experience death in life. As long as people continue having experiences which further map their positions in time, they consider themselves alive. Death, therefore, is not only understood as the end of existence of a being, but it can also be understood as a pause in experiences

while time continues to flow. According to Corrie, "on a less personal level in composing the poem, Eliot searched for symbol to help himself and his readers better glimpse aspects of human time..." (67). As a result, in the texts, this temporal phenomenon occurs on trains, which allow the passengers to move without moving and visualize the flow of time through the course of their journey. Nonetheless, the trains in both texts are the London Underground and a freight train carrying prisoners of war. In these instances, the notion of the flow of time is concealed, so the passengers find themselves timeless and, according to the previous definition, dead. This timelessness is mainly caused because trains act as in-between spaces where life cannot be satisfactorily fulfilled. In "Burnt Norton," time in the London Tube is depicted as being caught between well-defined concepts:

Here is a place of disaffection  
 Time before and time after  
 In dim light: neither daylight  
 Investing form with lucid stillness  
 .....  
 .....  
 Nor darkness to purify the soul  
 Emptying the sensual with  
 deprivation  
 .....  
 Neither plenitude nor vacancy ...  
 (90-99)

The third section of "Burnt Norton" refers to the dark night of the soul, a time where the bleakness of life and existence is at its most suffocating. Thus, the use of the word "disaffection" accurately sets the tone: in a dark, cramped train, people only care about themselves.

They feel lonely even if they are surrounded by people. These paradoxes continue in the other lines: the past and the future are both blurred together; light cannot properly shape objects; darkness cannot give people relief; and no one is fulfilled, yet no one is completely devoid either. Corrie further claims that trains “portray the limitations of lineal, sequential time” (67). In other words, even though the train transports people, it does so on a well-defined path towards the same destination: death. Overall, this in-between space greatly deprives people of experiences and time; thus, it deprives them of life itself. Since being caught in this timeless place is a form of death, the persona realizes that all aspects of life they have come to love are proven to be an illusion as death will eventually end it all. In “Slaughterhouse-Five,” death itself is more prominent as Billy is being transported on a train with other prisoners of war. While several men died on the journey, the rest experienced the same timeless sensation since the only way to see the outside world were through the “narrow ventilators at the corners of the car, under the eaves” (390). Eventually, time and space became distorted, as well: “It was black in the car, and black outside the car .... The car never seemed to go faster than [two miles an hour]. It was a long time between clicks, between joints in the track. There would be a click, and then a year would go by, and then there would be another click” (396-397). This new manner of perceiving and experiencing time echoes Rebecca Stern’s observations of time in Monet’s paintings. She states that, in spite of depicting Big Ben in several of his works, Monet never detailed the

clock face. However, “Monet hardly ever leaves time out of the picture. These paintings tell the time of the atmosphere and mood, of general scope rather than numerical account” (Stern 236). Even though the medium is different, the same principle applies. For Billy and the other prisoners, time became relative to their circumstances, and a second undoubtedly became a year. In a way, timelessness can be understood as a deconstruction of standardized time, as much as a simple existence out of the restrictions of time. In spite of the harsher conditions than on the London Tube, the sense of disaffection was not present: “When food came in, the human beings were quiet and trusting and beautiful. They shared” (392). This difference is most likely due to the haunting presence of physical death in war. Naturally, the soldiers did not want more of them to die. Their dark, slow and cramped car proved more than enough to instill a sense of death, and they were going to make sure that that bleakness did not become permanent.

In the end, both texts highlight the link between humanity’s anxiety over time, and the pointlessness and overestimation of death. Deep down, humans have always been driven by fear of death. The fixation people have on their material possessions and life experiences becomes a source of anxiety because, allegedly, life is short. Social expectations and Western thought come together to spur people to make a name for themselves that will live on forever. Nonetheless, in spite of this fueling fear of death, humanity has ironically built its achievements on its dead. In “Burnt Norton” the illusion of the rose garden is littered with dead leaves

while unspecified figures move on top of them (23-24). The world of possibility is then carpeted with dead refuse, but the image gains a more macabre tone when, in a later line, the speaker states that “. . . the leaves were full of children, / hidden excitedly, containing laughter” (40-41). This image of humanity standing on dead children is also present in “Slaughterhouse-Five.” While the author in the frame story is talking to an old army friend, his friend’s wife angrily reminded them that they were just children during the war. She said: “you’ll pretend you were men instead of babies . . . and war will look just wonderful, so we’ll have a lot more of them” (354). War, overall, poses as a paradoxical symbol. It bestows value to time and experiences, as people desire, but it does so by ending other lives. In the end, it reinforces the idea that life can only lead to death. In “Burnt Norton” the persona states that “. . . that which is only living / can only die” (140). In other words, high value on life can only lead to a high value on death. However, disassociating with this construct brings forth freedom, as Billy Pilgrim learned. After he embraced Tralfamadorian thought, he became a spiritual leader with a large following. People celebrated his teachings as they allowed humanity to actually live forever even after death. Thus, Billy brought his followers with him to the center of the wheel of time by teaching them that there is more to life than death.

In spite of their different contexts, Kurt Vonnegut’s “Slaughterhouse-Five” accurately exemplifies and develops

the main themes and images of time in T. S. Eliot’s “Burnt Norton.” As it is well known, Eliot’s work was heavily influenced by Buddhist and Hindi philosophy, whereas Vonnegut’s text is regarded as one of the greatest anti-war novels ever written. As seemingly unrelated as they are, both texts are ultimately unified by the zeitgeist of the (mid) twentieth century. It was a time where the world not only craved for answers, but they also sought for new ways to make sense of the world. They realized that, if time had been a construct all along, they could have simply built it again.

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