



**"TIME, AN ILLUSION: DISTORTING TEMPORAL REALITIES IN RAY BRADBURY'S SELECTED SHORT FICTIONS"**

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**Abstract**

*This study is about the textual time that has experienced a great change during the postmodern age. Since the time of Aristotle, the textual time, both subjective (inner time of a character) and objective (biological time of the character's surroundings), has been in a chronological order. There was a perfect sequence of cause and effect. However, with the rise of technological advancements in modern and postmodern ages, time has become a fluid concept, no longer fixed but an illusion that can be manipulated. The same thing is also adopted by literary figures in the postmodern age, like Ray Bradbury. Postmodern authors, including Bradbury, played with time in both subjective and objective ways. They distorted it for playful purposes and emphasized the fractured, unpredictable nature of reality. This research focuses on two of Bradbury's short fictions, *A Sound of Thunder* (1984) and *The Flying Machine* (1953), to demonstrate how temporal distortion is achieved through techniques like time travel and anachronism. In *A Sound of Thunder*, Bradbury explores time travel and the butterfly effect, that how a small action in the past can alter the future. In *The Flying Machine*, Bradbury uses anachronism to introduce a futuristic invention in an ancient setting, further distorting the flow of time. Thus, both the stories distort the temporality while playing with it.*

**Keywords:** Temporal Distortion, Postmodern Literature, Time Travel, Anachronism, Ray Bradbury.

**1. Introduction**

Time, for a long historical background, remained a matter of debate, on which several figures have presented their own views. In both scientific and literary studies, everyone has tried to experience and see the present along with the past and future at the same time. But this was not the case in history, I mean, in history, there was no technological development. Time was not like that in the present age. The locomotion and other aspects of life were carried down in a slow and steady manner. In history, famous philosophers like Aristotle suggested that we should remain stick to the time in a chronological way during narrative writing, as time is the only thing based on which we understand the sequence of events happening. In his book *Poetics*, he emphasizes obeying the unity of time by presenting the actions happening in the story in just one single day; otherwise, the story would seem less believable.

Then, the Enlightenment period came, and with that, the technological and economic spheres boomed. Scientists started experimenting to shrink the time with the invention of different locomotion objects. Travelling for the people became easier and faster. In a very short time, a day's journey was converted into an hourly journey. Then, in the 20th century, which is considered the second wave of modernism, Einstein presented the theory of relativity,



explaining how time can be dilated due to speed and gravity. Henri Bergson, in his most prominent book *Time and Free Will* (1883), states that time has two faces: Objective time (the time of watches and calendars) and *Laduree* (Lived time or the inner subjective experience). According to Sheposh, time perception refers to the subjective experience of time by the human mind, which can differ greatly from the objective, measured intervals such as seconds and minutes. Although time seems constant in everyday life, people frequently perceive its passage in various ways—time may feel like it's zooming during pleasurable experiences but creeping during dull tasks. This personal perception of time is shaped by numerous factors, encompassing psychological, environmental, and neurological aspects.

In the modern age, while trying to focus on the subjective time, literary writers started experimenting with narratives by 'Making (them) New'. In this regard, a new technique was introduced, which is called stream of consciousness. This term was introduced by William James in his book *Principles of Psychology* (1890). In literature, it was adopted as a new method by several literary figures to show the subjective experience or the inner time of the characters' thoughts. James Joyce experimented with this technique in his most notable work, *Ulysses* (1922), where he used stream of consciousness to depict the inner thoughts, emotions, and experiences of characters like Leopold Bloom and Stephen Dedalus, allowing readers to intimately experience their minds. I mean, the readers can experience the subjective time of the characters through the characters' thoughts, which are described by the author. Time is also experimented with by Virginia Woolf in her work, *To the Lighthouse* (1927). In this work, she portrayed the subjective time of Mrs. Ramsay through the stream of consciousness technique. Other notable figures in this style are Marcel Proust and D. H. Lawrence.

Then, time in literature experienced its greatest innovation with the arrival of the postmodern age. Postmodernism can be characterized by: the dismissal of rigid plot construction rules; an ironic perspective on reality; fragmented discourse; collage and montage techniques; genre hybridity; paradoxical elements; playful dealing with the temporality, text, and the reader; use of intertextual method; diverse styles; a complex textual structure; focus on multiple interpretations of the text; a reader co-authorship principle, among others. Narrative conventions are frequently overlooked. This study aims to look for one of these aspects, and that is time in the postmodern age. As mentioned above, time has experienced a tremendous change during the course of history, moving from linear chronological order to a non-linear form. In the postmodern age, time is altered for the sake of irony. In 1984, Moscow State University established an interdisciplinary seminar focused on researching the phenomenon of time. A new term has emerged – temporality, meaning time as a unity encompassing the past, the present, and the future (Fedosova, 2015). As I said, people, both scientific and literary, tried to experience the three temporalities at the same time. Literary figures of the postmodern age started playing with temporality to distort it, known as temporal distortion.

This study aims to analyze the selected works of Ray Bradbury from the perspective of postmodern temporal distortion described by Brian McHale and Barry Lewis. Ray Douglas Bradbury was a writer and screenwriter from the United States. One of the most renowned American authors of the 20th century, he wrote across multiple genres, such as fantasy, science fiction, horror, mystery, and realistic fiction. The researcher has chosen two short fictions of Bradbury: *A Sound of Thunder* and *The Flying Machine*. Both the short stories are published in his 1953 collection of *The Golden Apples of the Sun*. Both of the fictions are based on temporal distortion. To approach these stories, the researcher will use Brian McHale's concept of temporal distortion through anachronism and that of David Galens through time travel. The study investigates how certain characters in the story *A Sound of Thunder* distort time through

time-travelling to the past, to some sixty million years back in time. Similarly, it also tends to explore how Bradbury uses anachronism in *The Flying Machine* by introducing a flying machine in an era that is not fit for that.

### **1.2 Research Questions**

- How has the concept of time in literature evolved from earlier periods to the contemporary era, particularly with the influence of technological advancements and scientific developments?
- How do postmodern writers like Ray Bradbury distort temporal reality in their works, and how do these distortions reflect the scientific concept of time?

### **1.3 Thesis Statement**

The concept of time has evolved in literature from the era of Aristotle to the contemporary age, and from the linear and straightforward representation to the fragmented and distorted perception. In the postmodern era, temporality is completely distorted by the literary figures, which is nothing but the influence of technological and scientific advancement. Temporal distortion is achieved by introducing the concepts of time travel, anachronism, and apocryphal history in literary figures. For instance, the paper analyses two short stories of Ray Bradbury: *A Sound of Thunder* and *The Flying Machine*. These works manipulate the temporal reality that reflects the scientific concepts of time introduced by Einstein and Bergson.

## **2. Literature Review**

Prof. Dr. Lamiaa Ahmed Rasheed investigates a study regarding the temporal distortion in the postmodern age in her research. During her study, she tries to say that postmodern writers manipulate time for their own ease. “In order to understand the experience of time, authors link it with their works in the form of guessing, games, and puzzles, and observations of consciousness that make its nature even more complicated” (Rasheed, 2023, p. 487). To make her point clearer, she explores time distortion in one of Coover’s stories, *The Babysitter* (2014). She says that the plot of *The Babysitter* engages readers with various perplexing narratives by reconstructing the order of events, presenting diverse perspectives, and disclosing the story in pieces. As a postmodern writer, Coover alters the progression of a concept in every paragraph, allowing him to introduce additional elements to the story for readers to investigate. He challenges readers by totally changing the characters’ mindsets and their environments in an intellectual way. She describes such a distortion in the story as:

For example, the babysitter in one passage is killed, but in another section she is fine. Nothing has happened to her, ‘dishes done, children to bed, her books read, she watches the news on television’ (238), and, in one part, one of the babysitter's lovers, Mark, sleeps with her. Yet, in another section, Mark and his friend Jack are still waiting outside: ‘I got an idea,’ Mark says to Jack. ‘One of us goes and calls her on the phone, and the other watches when she comes out’ (224). (Rasheed, 2023, p. 485)

Postmodern literature can be evident as a form of deviation in the temporality of narratives. According to Grmuša (2013), time has completely changed. It has become fragmented, non-linear, and relative. He notes that “postmodern reality renders time phenomenon as accelerated, non-linear, fragmented, open-ended, instabile, instantaneous, disposable” (Grmuša, 2013). Grmuša takes the works of authors like Thomas Pynchon and Kurt Vonnegut, who use multiple temporalities in their works, *Gravity’s Rainbow* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*, respectively. These are examples of postmodern narratives that bear no longer linear propagation in time but in

chaotic and entangled force. In Pynchon's story, the characters experience time as "literally falling apart into different time scales, which have a simultaneous reality." (Grmuša, 2013), which shows the distortion of historical continuity of time in the postmodern age.

Postmodernist literature can be evident as a huge deviation from the traditional conception of time as well as space, which is in contrast to established narrative structure and to the notion of an objective reality. Sadeq (2024) notes such deviation during his study that "Postmodernism, as a literary and cultural movement, emerged in the latter half of the 20th century as a response to the shifting socio-political landscape and the questioning of traditional modes of representation". His study is both on postmodern time and space. According to Sadeq (2024) postmodern writers are a kind of manipulators who manipulate time to show the aspects of memory perception, and subjective reality, as described by Carter (1967), where such techniques allow for alternative perspectives and multiple interpretations of time.

The manipulation of time in postmodernist narratives reflects the subjective nature of memory and its impact on the construction of identity. Temporal distortions, such as flashbacks, time loops, and distorted perceptions of time, highlight the malleability of memory and its influence on the formation and reconstruction of personal and collective identities over time. (Sadeq, 2024)

Space is also made fluid and constructed in postmodernist literature. Postmodernist writers often go beyond the special boundaries through shifting landscapes and hybrid spaces. Postmodernist works show "shifting landscapes, hybrid spaces, and the collapse of physical and conceptual boundaries" (Sadeq, 2024). This manipulation portrays the picture of social construction that exposes how the cultural and political forces influence the spatial relations. Sadeq (2024) notes that "Postmodernist literature investigates the connection between space, identity, and social hierarchies".

## 2.1 Research Gap

Now, the previous studies have been mostly focused on time, which has been distorted in the postmodern era. But the present study is about how the textual temporality changed over time from history to the postmodern age. In this study, the focus is on the reason that literature is influenced by the distorted temporality in the modern and postmodern ages. The technological progress established a ground for the postmodern narrative that influenced its story and plot. Now time is nothing but an illusion. According to Einstein (1951) "The distinction between the past, present, and future is only a stubbornly persistent illusion". The present study tries to answer these temporalities by deploying the theory of temporal distortion on the selected short stories of Ray Bradbury. It presents how the two stories make the famous saying of Einstein that "time is an illusion" valid by twisting time and fracturing the boundaries of reality.

## 3. Theoretical Perspective

The study is conducted by following the postmodern concept of temporal distortion, which is explained by Brian McHale in his book *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987). According to McHale (1987), temporal distortion in a postmodern text works in different ways like, Apocryphal history, anachronism, or the blending of history and fantasy. Apocryphal history generally pertains to historical narratives that possess uncertain or questionable authenticity, origin, or precision. According to Barry Lewis (1998), the book *The Remains of the Day* (1989), which is written by Kazuo Ishiguro, is a timely distorted story as it contains the elements of apocryphal history. This novel suggests that a butler in a grand residence had a minor yet important part in the appeasement strategy that Britain pursued against Germany prior to the Second World War (Lewis, 1998, p. 124). Anachronism means when a writer presents certain

objects or ideas belonging to or appropriate to a period other than that in which they exist. For instance, in the novel *Flight to Canada* (1976) written by Ishmael Reed, one of the characters, Abraham Lincoln, speaks on a telephone, and news of his assassination is broadcast on television, causing a disruption in temporal sequence. In a blending of history with fantasy, Lewis (1998) gives us the example of Graham Swift's *Water/and*, where Tom Crick, a teacher, merges history and fiction by relating his narrative about the French Revolution with his own memories and unverified stories regarding the past of his family.

Another method of temporal distortion, according to David Galens (2002), is time travel, where the writer disrupts the chronological sequences by either leaping forward to the future or returning to the past to reintroduce a specific event or object into the narrative's present (Galens, 2002, p. 20). One matter of discussion is that we should not confuse the techniques of temporal distortion and stream of consciousness. Stream of consciousness is a modern technique in which the characters don't leave and move to some other places; rather, their thoughts, or in other words, their inner time, move to another place. The author doesn't tell the readers that his characters have moved into the past or future through their thoughts. However, in postmodern temporal distortion, the characters leave their places and move to another dimension. The author even informs the readers when the character is leaving or moving back in time, or moving into the future. Philip Rosen characterizes these different temporal experiences as a conflict zone: "Modern temporality is like a battle terrain. On this terrain, the disordering force of time struggles with the need and desire to order or control time" (Rosen, 2001) (141).

#### 4. Textual Analysis

Temporal distortion is a postmodern technique that is adopted by postmodernists for a playful purpose. Postmodernist mostly treats the serious situations in a playful and ironic way. Unlike modernists, the postmodernist aims not just to shift their characters to a new place through personal experience or inner time but also to physically shift them where they are not fit to reside. With the boom of technological development, the time is now shrunk to experience the three temporalities: past, present, and future, at one single time. The world has become so fast that each person can do anything in hours and minutes, the same thing that would require days to complete in history. It means that time is not a concept anymore to which we should align to do anything; it's now an illusion. Human beings have moved ahead of it. The same thing is also acquired by the postmodern literary figures who question why they should follow the chronological order when they can alter it for the sake of amusement and playfulness. In the modern era, authors were only altering the subjective time of their characters, but in the postmodern age, authors are more inclined towards the objective time, or the textual time of the characters. In this way, this study tends to investigate the short fictions of Ray Bradbury, who has achieved a remarkable position in twisting and distorting temporality. The study will focus on two of his short fictions: *A Sound of Thunder* and *The Flying Machine*.

##### 4.1 Time Travel as a Temporal Distortion

*A Sound of Thunder*, which is written by Ray Bradbury, is one of the best examples of temporal distortion and manipulation in postmodern literature. This short story is about a person, Eckels, who is a wealthy man who loves hunting. One day, he meets with a time-traveling safari company, Time Safari Inc., a company that provides an opportunity to wealthier people to move back in the past in order to hunt extinct animals, specifically dinosaurs. Through the protagonist Eckels, Bradbury shows us how temporality can be distorted through time-traveling and how playing with time can have consequences in which a small change in the past can lead to a



greater effect in the future. The narrative is best aligned with the concepts of temporality distortion, which are described by Brian McHale and David Galens. McHale's theory of temporal distortion in postmodern literature talks about several techniques: anachronism, apocryphal history, and time travel, all of which can be found in *A Sound of Thunder*. But the most dominant is time travel. "The author breaks the sequences of the timeline in which he either jumps to the future or goes back to the past to bring back a particular event or thing to the present of the story." (Galens, 2002).

The story begins in 2055 AD when Eckels and the other hunters: Travis, the Safari Leader, his assistant, Lesperance, and two other hunters, Billings and Kramer, are transported back in time through a time machine. In this way, the narrative changes from the present moment to an era 60 million years ago. "First a day and then a night and then a day and then a night, then it was day-night-day-night. A week, a month, a year, a decade! A.D. 2055. A.D. 2019. 1999! 1957! Gone! The Machine roared" (Bradbury, 1984, p. 90). Such shifting in time establishes a non-linear timeline that goes against the conventional flow of time, which is in chronological order. The characters travel from the future (A.D. 2055) to the past before the human era into the Mesozoic Era, where they see dinosaurs. Through this moment in time, Bradbury questions the stability and reliability of time itself.

The temporal distortion in *A Sound of Thunder* is not only achieved through the movement backward in time but also through the consequences of time travel. The most evident instance is the "butterfly effect", which is described through Eckels' careless actions during the safari. This arrogant, wealthier person is time and again warned by Travis not to alter anything in the past that could lead to consequences in another time. If even one specie is harmed in the past, then it could kill the whole descending chain of that species in the future. "Not knowing it, we might kill an important animal, a small bird, a roach, a flower, even, thus destroying an important link in a growing species" (Bradbury, 1984, p. 91). Thus, they have to kill only those species that are near death or that have no future generations, like Tyrannosaurus Rex. Thus, they always stay on their own made flying path in order to avoid disrupting the past. But when Eckels suddenly sees a Tyrannosaurus Rex, he is overwhelmed by fear and steps off the Path, crushing a butterfly in the process. These actions set off a chain of events that drastically alter the future.

When they come back to the future, what they see is that first, the letters of the signboard are changed. "TYME SEFARI INC. SEFARIS TU ANY YEER EN THE PAST. YU NAIM THE ANIMALL. WEE TAEK YU THAIR. YU SHOOT ITT" (Bradbury, 1984, p. 98). Now, the author didn't mention how a single murder of a butterfly can affect the English alphabet. But we can consider that in 1996, a Norwegian Publisher and author, Kjell Bloch Sandved, had published a book, *Butterfly Alphabet*, which was compiled based on his twenty-four-year journey while photographing the butterflies. During that, he found all twenty-six letters of the English alphabet on the butterflies' wings, and the numbers 0-9. So, from that we can say that crushing the butterfly by Eckels has altered the spellings of the words in the future. Moreover, at the beginning of the story, when they are leaving for the past, Keith succeeds in the elections and becomes the president of the United States. He is a friendly and democratic leader who fights for the freedom of the people. But when Eckels and the others return from the journey, with a dead butterfly, they see that a totalitarian dictator, Deutscher, has replaced Keith as the president. Now, the native Americans consider the butterfly a symbol of transformation, hope, and freedom. But, crushing that very butterfly has replaced such freedom with an authoritative government in the United States.

Thus, the story *A Sound of Thunder* has totally distorted the time by shifting the characters to the past, and then the consequences of such action. I mean, the time of the future is greatly impacted by the actions in the past.

#### 4.2 Anachronism as a Temporal Distortion

In Ray Bradbury's *The Flying Machine*, temporal distortion is not explored in the same manner as it is in *A Sound of Thunder*, but the distortion of time through the concept of flight can be quite a matter of discussion. Unlike the former story, *The Flying Machine* uses the concept of flight to align itself with the postmodern concept of temporal distortion, as described by David Galens and Brian McHale. The story is set in 400 AD during the time of Emperor Yuan in China. This period is long before the invention of flight in human history. An unknown person creates a flying machine, which is described as a fantastical object that is made of paper and bamboo that allowing the inventor to soar through the sky. This invention makes the Emperor worried about his own empire, which is surrounded by the Great Wall. In this way, the Emperor has to kill the person so as to maintain his order in the place, so that the invention should not be handed over to his enemies.

In the story, one day, a servant informs the Emperor that he saw a strange thing in the sky calls it "a miracle". When the Emperor visits the place where the man was flying, he saw that "the man was clothed in bright papers and reeds to make wings and a beautiful yellow tail, and he was soaring all about like the largest bird in a universe of birds, like a new dragon in a land of ancient dragons" (Bradbury, 1953, p. 52). In this way, time is distorted not by the going back or moving forward in time but by the introduction of a fantastical object in an era that goes beyond the conventional boundaries of time. So, the flying man's creation represents a leap forward in technological development, which is something to be called anachronistic for the period in which it occurs. Barry Lewis notes about anachronism that "it disrupts temporal order by flaunting glaring inconsistencies of detail or setting" (Lewis, 1998, p. 124). In postmodern temporal distortion, anachronism is one of the means for disrupting time in postmodern fiction. In the story, the very existence of the flying machine in a time period to which it is not fit is anachronistic. The Emperor's world lives in peace and stable order that follows tradition, but the invention of the flying machine represents a radical shift in that order. The very idea of flight, which can be made common in the far-off ages of technological development, is included in a place as an unimaginable breakthrough in a time when such concepts would have seemed fantastical. Now, according to McHale and Lewis, this kind of anachronism creates a sense of temporal distortion, where the natural flow of history is disturbed by the premature appearance of an advanced technology.

McHale (1987) was of the view that anachronistic style in postmodern fiction shows the tension between different historical periods, which forces the readers to reconsider the rigid boundaries of time. In *The Flying Machine*, the introduction of the flying device represents a collision of historical periods: the ancient past, as represented by the Emperor's world, and the potential future, as embodied by the invention. In this way, such a collision of times creates a disturbance in time, where the boundaries between past, present, and future blur. The Emperor, when he sees the flying machine for the first time, cannot digest it. Why, because it does not fit within the historical narrative he understands. The flying machine stands against his authority and challenges it, which seems quite strange to him. Thus, he orders to end it.

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, time is quite strangely treated by the authors in the postmodern age. Postmodernism, an age that accepts every side and every way of treating the subject matter, is what makes it seem paradoxical. The age is a change in and the continuation of what was practiced in the past. Playing with time was what was practiced in the modern age. However, before that, the narrative was built and plotted in a chronological order. In the postmodern age, authors have experienced time in its three basic modes: the past, present, and future, something which is called temporality. So playing with such a kind of temporality in an ironic way is called temporal distortion. Ray Bradbury, with other postmodern writers like Kazuo Ishiguro, Ishmael Reed, and Graham Swift, has distorted time in different ways, like time travel, anachronism, apocryphal history, and even blending history with fantasy.

In this way, the study aims to explore the time (temporality) that has experienced different changes with the passage of time in the literary arena. It explores how the concept of time has experienced a great change from the past to the postmodern age. In earlier periods, like in history, time was seen as a steady, linear progression, where events followed a clear and predictable order in narratives. Characters' actions would seem to be in alignment with one specific time and place, as it is proposed by Aristotle in his *Poetics*. However, the technological boom with the rise of modernism and postmodernism has shifted this view of time. Postmodern literature, as seen in Bradbury's works, challenges the traditional flow of time by introducing techniques like time travel and anachronism, which distort the chronological sequence and create a fragmented understanding of time.

In this way, the study focuses on the selected works of the postmodern American writer, Ray Bradbury, which fall under the umbrella of temporal distortion in postmodernism. For this purpose, the study discusses two short fictions of Bradbury: *A Sound of Thunder* and *The Flying Machine*. In *A Sound of Thunder*, temporal distortion is achieved through time travel when the safari company allows characters to travel to the past to hunt dinosaurs. Not only traveling to the past, but also killing the butterfly to create a butterfly effect, entitles this story as a piece of postmodern literature that plays with time. The second story, *The Flying Machine*, distorts the temporality by introducing an object that seems quite strange for the era in which it exists. Such a method is known as anachronism, according to McHale and Lewis. Thus, in all the cases, these short fictions give a piece of evidence that could be seen as quite a postmodern temporal distortion.

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