The allure of time travel is that it allows for discovery and adventure in a place that was thought forever lost. Shows like Doctor Who depict such ideas, with the Doctor and his companion(s) going on fantastic adventures through space and time, interacting with the varying cultures along the way. There is, however, an aspect of time travel that doesn’t get much focus, although it plays an important role: the cost. While in some cases the travel is for mere pleasure, in others the reader sees the repercussions of such excursions. Through stories comparable to Stephen Baxter’s The Time Ships, Max Beerbohm’s “Enoch Soames: A Memory of the Eighteen-Nineties,” Ray Bradbury’s “A Sound of Thunder,” and L. Sprague de Camp’s “A Gun for a Dinosaur,” different types of costs are illustrated and time travel does not have a flat fee. Time travel can cost money, morals, life itself, or even the course of history, with each scenario forever changing the traveler.

The first cost of time travel is a monetary one. To be able to travel such a distance, the technology must first work. This is shown in de Camp’s “A Gun for a Dinosaur,” when the narrator says “The machine cost a cool thirty million. I understand this came from the Rockefeller Board and such people, but that accounted for the original cost only, not the cost of operation. And the thing uses fantastic amounts of power” (216), thereby putting a dollar amount on time travel itself. Although one would think that the ability to explore through space and time would be so fantastic that a price cannot be named for it, the narrator does so easily. This cost factors into time travel’s limitations, especially in regards to the class of people who would be able to afford it. Since the cost is so high, it makes sense that travelling through time to hunt dinosaurs would become unique to upper class society.

The narrator addresses this directly, bringing up the fact that “... [the] guides catered to people with money, a species with which America seems well stocked” (216), clearly stating the general clientele. Due to this limited audience, is time travel truly being respected as it should be, or does it become more of a game? Through the characters treating the travel as a means for bragging rights and trophies, they are lowering both the value of the journey, and that of their money. This lowered value implies that the characters, such as Courtney James, blindly embark on the safari without a second thought about what else the trip might cost. If he is only concerned with
the financial burden that time travel poses, then he is not conscious of the possible dangers of such an endeavor. Although the loss of the money may not directly impact the character, the focus on the money implies that there is a feeling of invincibility if one has enough money.

Another story that exemplifies a physical cost is Bradbury’s “A Sound of Thunder,” where the fee is ten thousand dollars per person. The strict rules for this story’s time travelers have the potential to heighten this cost further, as an official states, “If you disobey instructions, there’s a stiff penalty of another ten thousand dollars, plus possible government action, on your return” (203). These costs, in conjunction with the previous discussion of the limited audience, reveal that time travel, though enviable to the reader, has become mundane to the society within the story. It has become another job that can make ends meet, although the journey is fantastic. Much as flight used to be unheard of and fantastic in nearly the same sense, it has just become another vehicle used to get to a desired location. The cost of time travel is high, but not high enough to gain respect for it. Although there are strict rules within this story, as opposed to de Camp’s, the focus is still mostly on the financial issue, although danger is directly addressed as a possible concern by the main character, Eckels. The financial cost brings time travel into a tangible realm, but it also leads the focus slightly away from issues of safety. Also, the idea that a monetary fee can cover any violations of rules during the journey again implies that invincibility. The realization that money can’t change the past sobers Eckels at the end of the story, and he has to face his fate.

The next cost of time travel is that of morals, which is best depicted through Beerkohm’s “Enoch Soames: A Memory of the Eighteen-Nineties.” Soames’ greatest wish is to see the impact of his literature on future generations, especially a hundred years into the future. In his hasty wishing, he says “... Or, better still, if I could be projected now, at this moment, into that future, into that reading-room, just for this one afternoon! I’d sell myself body and soul to the devil for that” (46). Though this may have been meant as jocular, he goes through with a deal. The trip does not have the outcome that he desires, but he is still stuck with the damnation that he chose. In this, he is similar to Doctor Faustus because he chooses damnation without putting much thought into the repercussions of such a deal. In both cases, the outcome is not what was expected, and yet they are both stuck with the choices they have made. Enoch’s greed and pride already give him a basis for judgement from the audience, but selling his soul for the opportunity to travel through time finishes his moral judgement. By the end of the story, he no longer has free will to live out the rest of his life as he pleases: he is immediately sentenced to his eternity in Hell. Instead of thinking about how much more he could foster his writing career, he blinds himself and jumps into an inescapable
situation. He disregards the life that he could have finished in order to fulfill his selfish desires, and ends the career that he seemed to love. While he is presented with the opportunity to give people something to remember, he instead makes it so that it is up to someone else to make people remember that he lived, therefore making him dependent upon another the fulfill his life goals.

In addition to these, time travel can cost life itself. Enoch Soames becomes damned for all eternity, and his life forfeit before he could finish it. The devil takes him away and he disappears for the rest of time. His disappearance signifies his departure into Hell, and therefore the death of his human life. Not only did Soames sacrifice his moral character, but also the rest of the life that could have been spent writing. This begs the question: was it worth it? Yes, he was able to view the lack of impact that his writing would have on future generations, but he also gave up his opportunity to write and publish anything else. Since writing seems to be the thing that he cherishes the most in his life, it is strange that he would make such a bargain, knowing that he would not come out of the experience. Although it should be common knowledge that making a bargain with the devil is never a good idea, I wonder if Soames thought about how quickly his sentence would begin. Had he been fully aware of how little time he would have left over, would he have made a different choice, or would his curiosity still have won out? After returning with the devil, Soames seems more timid that he originally was, showing a change in personality after his travel through time. His next change, of course, is that he disappears, never to be heard from again.

Another prime example of time travel’s deadly component is found within “A Gun for A Dinosaur.” Courtney James’ greed and pride become focal points when he decides to go back to the Cretaceous a second time. His vices also come to light through the fact that he can so easily lie about why he wants to go back in time. James’ excuse for wanting to go back to April twenty-third, specifically, is “I lost my wallet in the Cretaceous... I figure if I go back to the day before I arrived in that era on my last trip, I’ll watch myself when I arrived on that trip and follow myself around till I see myself lose the wallet” (234), which is false. Due to the humiliation that the Raja and the narrator, Reggie, made him feel at the end of the original voyage, James wants to kill them and prevent the affair. In this story, however, time is not malleable, but self-regulating. Since time is powerful in this representation, James’ journey causes him to be taken out of time and killed. He is incapable of interfering with timelines as he pleases, and therefore dies. De Camp clearly explains this phenomenon by stating that “... the instant James started to do anything that would make a visible change in the world of eighty-five million B.C., such as making a footprint in the earth, the space-time forces snapped him forward to the present to prevent a paradox. And the violence of
the passage practically tore him to bits" (235). James’ carelessness makes him no longer able to interact with time, and he is therefore permanently removed. Although the character was never shown to have a cognitive change, accepting the fact that he is not, in fact, invincible, his death shows that he is obviously not the same as he was prior to time travel.

A third death that resulted from time travel is that of Eckels after stepping on a butterfly in “A Sound of Thunder.” Through this simple action, time is altered enough to change the English language in addition to an important election. His small mistake degrades the intelligence of society at large, and the change is irreversible. Due to this, similar to Courtney James, he has to be taken out of time and so Travis, the Safari Guide, shoots him. This story represents time as being malleable, as opposed to de Camp’s self-correcting version, so mistakes made throughout time have huge impacts.

While a butterfly sounds insignificant in relation to time as a whole, Travis’ explanation for the reason why the rules of time travel are strict makes perfect sense, and he brings up a good point. His reasoning is that “[w]e don’t want to change the Future. We don’t belong here in the Past... A Time Machine is finicky business. 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” (205), which depicts a central idea about time travel: people belong in the time in which they were born, and time is not to be disturbed.

Whenever that someone tries to play God with time, there are consequences. Courtney James is killed through the impact of returning him to his own time, and Eckels causes everyone to suffer the backlash of his mistake. In the case of Eckels, however, he has the worst punishment even prior to his actual death. This is due to the fact that he has to remember what the world was like before, and that he is the cause of the drastic changes. Travis killing Eckels is actually a merciful move because he may very well have been driven crazy by the guilt of knowing what he has caused.

Through staying and accepting the fact that he must be taken out of time for what he has caused shows that Eckels has grown brave throughout the course of the trip. He went into the trip worried about his own well-being, but by the end of the journey he accepts that paying a fee cannot reverse the changes he has caused.

Furthermore, history itself is exchanged for time travel, such as in the case of Baxter’s The Time Ships. The Time Traveller’s first adventure (as seen through H. G. Wells’ The Time Machine) broke history. Although on that premier voyage through time he was able to meet Weena and become accustomed to that particular society, his travels also altered the course of history. As he looks to return to Weena, the Time Traveller again comes in contact with Morlocks (similar to that initial journey). Through altering the course of history, the Morlocks that he encounters on this trip have advanced, no longer acting as the brutes the Traveller originally
witnessed. The issue here is that the Traveller himself has not changed and expects the Morlocks to engage in the same behavior as before, therefore prompting him to act as a savage. His attack of Morlocks as they approach him shows that he is the one moving throughout various versions of history. Nebogipfel, the main Morlock in the story, as well as the Time Traveller’s companion on his journeys throughout the novel, explains that the Morlocks that the Traveller attacked were “[c]hildren. They were children... the Earth is become a... nursery, a place for the children to roam. They were curious about [the] machine. That is all. They would not have done [the Traveller], or it, any harm. Yet [he] attacked them, with great savagery” (62). Not only is the Traveller losing his civilized nature here, but the difference of this timeline is visible. The Morlocks that he is used to seeing as vicious and evil are now curious and innocent. In addition, Weena does not exist in this version of the future, thereby raising the possibility that the Traveller has killed the culture that he loves in his haste to explore time. Because of this possibility, he is guilty for destroying the woman that he has come to adore.

Sometime after finding that the timeline has changed dramatically, Nebogipfel brings in the idea of multiple histories. The Traveller has not necessarily killed time, but he has changed its course. Instead of having one single progression from past to future that is fixed, the entire concept of time is shifted. Nebogipfel explains that “You must think of these versions of History as parallel corridors, stretching ahead of you... The corridors exist independently of each other: looking ahead from any point, a man looking along one corridor will see a complete and self-consistent History — he can have no knowledge of another corridor, and nor can the corridors influence each other” (135), so history has been split into different compartments, as opposed to being a single, steady flow. This impacts the Traveller’s ability to see Weena again, the Traveller himself, and Nebogipfel’s ability to return home. Since these multiple histories have been created, the Traveller is never guaranteed the ability to meet Weena again, nor is he able to know which history he has become a part of. This also allows him to meet his younger self without causing a paradox, which results in him witnessing his own death. He is also responsible for the loss of Nebogipfel’s home because it was lost through time. The Traveller in this story becomes a savage in comparison to the Morlock that is presented, and he is also guilty of breaking history. Although he is still a curious soul, he learns to be careful with how he acts on his curious impulses. He can no longer safely travel through time, and he becomes responsible with his actions. In each of these stories, time travel costs more than the adventurer would originally think. While the characters in de Camp and Bradbury’s stories are fully prepared for the monetary cost of the travel, they are not prepared for what else they must sacrifice for their
experiences. In each story, a character dies because of his interference with time, therefore heightening the cost. Beerbohm's character Enoch was not fully prepared to lose all morality in exchange for seeing the impact that he would never make on society, though he still had to follow through with his bargain with the devil. Finally, Wells and Baxter's Time Traveller was not prepared for the fact that, in order to explore time, he would have to shatter it into countless pieces. What all of these stories have in common is that the greatest cost of all was the person that the traveler was prior to the journey. None of these characters remained the same from the beginning of the story until the end of it, and none of them can ever go back. The innocence, or any remnant of ignorance of time, was lost through the journey and they are each forever changed because of their travels.

Works Cited


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