

Marching to the Big Trip Yonder: A Study on Near-Death experience of Soldiers in short Narratives of Kurt Vonnegut and Roald Dahl

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Abstract

Kurt Vonnegut and Roald Dahl have both been veterans of the Second World War, the experiences of which made them the authors we know today. Both the authors had near-death experiences on the war front, but they lived on to tell the tale. Roald Dahl's solo flight, crash, and recovery while flying to meet the members of his squadron remind one of Vonnegut's experiences as a prisoner of war in the Battle of Bulge, where they were locked up in the basement of a slaughterhouse, numbered 5, making them sole survivors of the Dresden bombing. Both these authors encountered death in such proximity that their experiences made it into their memoirs, short stories, and novels. Death is a much-feared topic amongst soldiers—like an ominous omnipresence that one can neither dismiss nor discuss openly. In this research paper, I intend to discuss some of these stories and the myths that revolve around this ever-present phenomenon that remains shrouded from human knowledge.

Keywords: Thanatology, Mists of time, Time-machine, Near-Death experiences, War, Death.

Stories of war come with the news and anticipation of death lurking around nooks and corners, waiting for the most unexpected prey. Death comes as a punisher, as a redeemer, a teacher, an anarchist, a pacifist – all at the same time. Sometimes death comes along with the sudden piercing sound of blasting shells, and sometimes it comes as if it were a thin film of

smog settling gradually upon a rugged city. But stories do not often end with death: the living and the dead keep on haunting each other in remorse, revenge, and realizations. Vonnegut's struggle with death and with the dying or dead finds a vivid recollection in his semi-autobiographical work of fiction, *Slaughterhouse-Five*. More direct and undiluted experiences of dying can be gathered from Dahl's tryst with death in his wartime autobiography, *Going Solo*. In his story, "A Piece of Cake," the description the protagonist gives about the moments before dying seems to be drawn from Dahl's near-death experience. Vonnegut, too, writes about self-induced near-death experiences in his book *God Bless You, Mr. Kervokian*, where he deliberately goes into a death limbo to talk to dead people about their experiences of dying. This paper aims to understand the different stories that build upon the mystery and myths revolving around death in a few short stories of Kurt Vonnegut and Roald Dahl, both of who had firsthand experience in the Second World War.

'Thanasphere' is a chilling story about Major Allen Rice, an American astronaut who had been selected to go up into space and report weather conditions over the enemy territory, i.e., Russia. He finds an extra layer in the earth's atmosphere, just before the exosphere, inhabited entirely by the spirits of dead people. Therefore,

the name of this realm, Thanasphere —the sphere of the deceased. 'Great Day' is another Vonnegutian tale that takes one through the mists of time in and out of the two world wars, allowing the mingling of the words of the living and the dead. Many of these stories have stark resemblances with Roald Dahl's stories about war and death in smaller or more significant parts. But the most striking similarity is with a report titled 'They Shall Not Grow Old,' which narrates an English pilot's near-death experience followed ultimately by his untimely death.

They were first published in Collier Weekly on September 2nd, 1950, 'Thanasphere' challenges what scientists had known so far. The story began on July 26th when people claimed to have noticed a spacecraft fly across the moon. The scientists, however, said that there had been no such thing, but they were lying, as had been ordered by the North American Government. The government knew very well that it was probably a space shuttle or a baby moon sent up by Russia to spy on the USA, but they decided to keep it hidden from the civilians' knowledge. Even though there was a lot more than the scientists and the government knew, there was still a lot to the universe's great mysteries they did not know. Following the viewing of the speck across the moon, Major Allen Rice was to be shot up to space as a spy for the US to report weather conditions in their enemy territories. The mission was being conducted by Dr. Bernard Groszinger, a young rocket consultant for the American air-force. He tried to convince the common people, 'No rocket ship will leave the earth for at least another twenty years.' (Vonnegut, "Thanasphere," 38) This, too, was a lie. Groszinger marveled over the machine he had built. The man who was to fly in that machine, Major Allen Rice, was selected on several grounds:

Even the man was as much like a machine as possible. ... He was quick, strong, and unemotional. Psychiatrists had picked Major Rice from a hundred volunteers and predicted that he would function as perfectly as the rocket motors. The metal hull, the electronic controls. His specifications: Husky, Twenty-nine years of age, fifty-five missions over Europe during the Second World War without a sign of fatigue, a childless widower, melancholy and solitary, a career soldier, a demon at work. (Vonnegut, "Thanasphere," 39)

After Major Rice successfully signaled back from outer space, everybody was thrilled, but when asked how he liked it there, the tone of his voice disturbed Groszinger. Rice said, "This side of the earth's dark., very dark just now. And I feel like I'm falling—the way you said I would." (40). However, in the vast vacuum of the universe, Dr. Groszinger's voice was not the only voice Major Rice could hear. The radio frequency lines were being interrupted by some other extra-terrestrial noise. Major Rice reported that he could listen to a child crying, followed by the sound of an older man comforting the child. Rice continues, "They're getting louder now. The voices are louder. I can't hear you very well above them. It's like standing in the middle of a crowd, with everybody trying to get my attention at once. It's like" (Vonnegut, "Thanasphere," 40). The message muffled and trailed off. The next time when Dr. Groszinger found out if anybody by the name of Andrew Tobin was a voice Major Rice could hear. The voice claimed that his brother had murdered him. Even after these facts were proven, Groszinger's scientist mind could not believe it and still kept on dismissing them as either some sophomoric prank or some silly superstitions or delusions

perceived by Major Rice. It turns out that Major Rice had stumbled upon something he called the 'Than sphere.' Just between the Thermosphere and Exosphere, there was another layer in the earth's atmosphere. Ghosts and spirits populated this layer. The evidence was in the authenticity and truthfulness of the stories Major Rice heard from the voices lurking around his spaceship.

This reminds one of an experience described by General Fin in the short story 'They Shall Not Grow Old' by Roald Dahl. Written five years before Vonnegut's story, this story was published for the first time in March 1945 in *The Ladies Home Journal*. Fin was one of the very few pilots left alive in Squadron 80. But he, too, had been missing for over two days. As the rest of the pilots reported him missing and sat together talking fondly of the reminiscences of Fin, they suddenly saw a Hurricane¹ land. Even before the plane could land, the other pilots immediately recognized Fin sitting in the cockpit. After he got off, he was flooded with questions about his disappearance and whereabouts. Fin was as stunned by these questions as were the others when he told them he had been gone only for an hour and a half at most. He had to urgently inform the navy that 'they' were still at the harbor in Bey Routh. Who they remained uncertain till the end of the story. Apart from this, Fin could not remember anything else at all. The next day when the entire squadron was up in the air flying their planes, Fin suddenly remembered everything that had happened in the last two days. He could recall every bit and was as eager as a child to share his experience with everybody.

The eagerness foretold the unbelievable nature of the story he would narrate. As he started telling, he took everyone along with him through the highs and lows of the journey he had

embarked on. As he flew at the height of about twenty thousand feet over Tyre and Sidon and the Diamond River, he suddenly flew into a cloud. A thick white cloud engulfed him. He tried flying low and rising higher, but after a while, he realized he was in no control of the plane. The cloud itself was driving the plane, and there was not much he could do about it. He lost all track of time:

"I never once wondered where I was going. I just went.

...

I came out of the cloud so suddenly and quickly that I was blinded. There was no space of time between being in it and being out of it.

...

It was bright and clear, like pleasant sunlight, but there was no sun.

Then I saw them. (Dahl, "They," 276-277)

As far as his eyes could take him, he could see a long line of aircraft, all moving ahead in a single line as if in a procession, and suddenly Fin could recognize who they were.

I do not know why or how I knew it, but I knew as I looked at them that they were the pilots and the crews who had been killed in the battle, who now, in their aircraft, were making their last flights, their last journey. (Dahl, "They," 277)

The typical pattern of the two representations of the realm of death is that souls soar upward when their bodies die. But from where does this imagination or concept come from? In pagan religions, it is believed that after death, a soul assimilates and becomes one with the universe. The body disintegrates into the material world, and the spirit floats away. Even in Judea Christian religions, the soul is imagined to go to heaven or hell after death. While

paradise is considered above us, hell slows the soul into a bottomless abyss. In Christianity, the dead are said to become one with the lord instead of assimilating into the universe. After death, it is the lord himself who resurrects the dead person into an existence of eternal bliss. This can be seen as the second baptism. Here, instead of being submerged in water, the believer's body is buried in the earth, and as in baptism, a person rises, washed off all his sins in an eternal existence of joy in the lord's company. It is stated in the bible in Colossians 2:12 about baptism: "buried with him in baptism, in which you were raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead."

In 'They Shall Not Grow Old, we see the dead soldiers rising. Wars make people kill. Those people who wouldn't even hurt a fly are supposed to pull the trigger at one word of the command. Every day of life is a narrow escape from death, which looms large on the soldiers as they carry the burden of death on their shoulders, knowing that almost every time they survived, they lived because someone else died in his place. They were not enemies these soldiers killed. They were people. Merely people. In a moment like this, death felt like a redeemer. From the great heights of the sky, they fell from their planes as if they were taking a dip in holy water to wash away their sins. From there, they rise again and are headed towards the serene green meadow, which to Fin's eyes, was nothing short of what he had imagined paradise to be.

Instinctively I glanced down over the cockpit, and there I saw it spread out below me, a vast green plain. It was green and smooth and beautiful; it reached the far edges of the horizon where the sky's blue came down and

merged with the green of the plain. (Dahl, "They," 279)

It was so beautiful that it felt like flying straight into the field. However, no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't descend into the area.

I looked out of the cockpit at the ground, judging the height, and I saw the green of the ground blurred as it rushed past and below me. I waited for my aircraft to sink and touchdown. It seemed to take a long time. ... 'Get down, I shouted, 'please get down.' (Dahl, "They," 280-281)

He was at the height of six feet above the ground, and suddenly he gathered speed. He tried to slow down, but that was of no use either. Suddenly, he was in the same cloud that had initially brought him to this realm. As he gradually disappeared into the cloud once again, he saw the series of fellow dead fellow fighters descending into the field of bliss, away from the worries of war. He wanted to join them too, but no matter how hard he tried, it was not his day, not yet at least.

Major Rice and Fin witnessed something other people would find hard to believe. While in Fin's case, the fellow pilots listened with rapt attention, Grossinger and the other scientists at the Air Force office were almost liable to disbelieve rice as a debt they owed to science. The scientists knew very well that here was a thing that they neither new nor could they explain. There was a phenomenon that remained undiscovered to date. They could neither admit this nor could they investigate further because that was something that the US army did not need. In the time of war, who is bothered about the dead? People die as naturally as they are born, and one can do nothing about it. Martyrs of

war are all but plaques in graveyards. However, amongst the ordinary people who were never skilled for war but merely trained before participation, 'death' was a topic of fear, interest, and reverence. Most believe that to die, one must almost go through the rites of passage and then a voyage into the realm of death. Just like Fin's voyage to the land of death, another protagonist of Kurt Vonnegut also goes through some journey to the land of death, which was also through a cloud-like mist.

'Great Day' is a short story taken from Kurt Vonnegut's war collection *Armageddon in Retrospect*. Vonnegut takes the sixteen-year-old boy and his wild imagination on tour through the mists of time, paving the way for a far more well-known war novel, *Slaughterhouse-Five*. At sixteen, the narrator says he looked like twenty-five and took this to his advantage while enrolling himself in the army. It is tough to tell apart the real from the unreal. The narrator is injured during the war and wakes up to find himself in a hospital bed. A lot of what goes on in the story is the boy's real-life experiences, all mixed up with hallucinations and delirium during his moments of utter pain, agony and loneliness. Vonnegut entangles the reader in a time trap where one cannot tell the future from the present and the present from the past. The narrator and protagonist is a Zulu boy who will join the Army of the Boy.

The boy claims that he joined the army in a year which is still far away in the future, and troops there no longer make war. They are employed to keep the peace. Gone were those days when young men martyred themselves for the sake of democracy. They used to work for a time-screen company, the first one and the last one, because there were faults in the time machine that needed to be fixed. The very name

references the phrase, 'mists of time'. The company provided screens through which their armies went to establish peace in places where war was. The soldiers were all getting ready for attack. They had no idea what their mission was about. All that they could do was to be ready for whatever came may. The narrator followed his boss Poritsky: "When he headed off to one side, towards a line of flares, I figured he wanted to get into the smoke where folks couldn't see him so that he could get sick in private." (Vonnegut, "Great," 83). As the narrator kept following Poitsky, the captain shouted at him to get back to his timeline through a hole in the smoke. Poritsky moved to that part of the smoke where the time machine's flares were the thickest, a spot from which one can no longer return to his timeline. As they proceeded, they were standing above a shell hole. Since the hole was in the past, and there was no hole in the future, it seemed as if they were hanging above the hole. In the shell hole, they saw two dead men and two alive. One of the corpses had no head at all, and the other corpse's head had been blown into two parts. The narrator continues, "He could see where the poor nineteen eighteen souls had been crawling around and around in that hole, like snails crawling around in a fish bowl. There was a track leading from each one—the life and the dead ones." (Vonnegut, "Great," 84).

According to the Macmillan dictionary, the very definition of the phrase 'mists of time' means "a period of time so long-ago people cannot remember it." From this definition, several authors have used this metaphor to materialize their imagination and concepts through words. The metaphoric mists evolve into a natural fog to give a perception that it presents the past being seen through a thick fog, so much so that the vision of the other side blurs and eventually disappears. Vonnegut uses this

metaphor to tell us the story of the sixteen-year-old narrator who claimed to be from the year Two Thousand and Thirty-Seven. According to him, there will be no more separate armies of each country in the future. There was only one military organization, known as the army of the world, and their job was to keep the peace. Therefore, when he left home, he says, "Didn't nobody cry. There weren't no flags, there weren't no bands. It wasn't like in the olden times, where young boys like I'd be going away to maybe get his head blown off for democracy." (Vonnegut, "Great," 76). It seems as if Vonnegut was using the Army of the World and the Time Screen Company as storytelling devices to bring back to the memories of people the unimaginable horrors of war that have been lost in the mists of time. Wars have been degraded into mere numbers and political facts like how and when the World Wars began and ended, who participated in them, political alliances, and a rough but hugely incorrect number of men who died fighting in the wars. It is later in the story when Captain Poritsky tells his troops, "Men, " ... "The mission of this here time-screen company ain't any different from ever company since time began The mission of this here time-screen company is to kill! Any questions?" (Vonnegut, "Great," 82). So, the only way of keeping the peace is war. Killing is the key. Kill all who are against you, and you'll be at peace. But unlike Dante, who Virgil led to give us a description of hell in *Inferno*, or unlike Lazarus, who was brought back from the dead to warn the wealthy moneylender about his ways and his place in hell, nobody who went through Vonnegut's time machine could come back. There were bugs in the time machine, and anybody who went through the thick smoke of the flares from the time machine was lost forever along with the long-forgotten history. There was no way of reminding people about the hell on earth that the

Warfield was. Once the narrator entered the war field in nineteen hundred and eighteen, all he could see were ghosts, dead in their time, spirits trying to kill each other, and the men from the future. Men were dying like ants. Like Captain Major Rice, the narrator of 'Great Day' was in another Thanosphere, another land of the dead lying around in ghost trenches and holes that have been filled up. When a supernatural encounter happens, one loses his hold on reality. The narrator in 'Great Day' says:

If you have a heart and come upon something like that in thick smoke, ain't nothing else in this universe going to be accurate. There wasn't any more Army of the World; there wasn't any more peace everlasting; there wasn't any more Lu Verne; there wasn't any more time machine. (Vonnegut, "Great," 84)

In nineteen hundred and eighteen, the narrator was hit by a barrage which killed Poritsky instantly and injured him. He woke up in a hospital, which was initially a cathedral. Sitting on his bed in the hospital, he kept asking if it was still nineteen hundred and eighteen. He kept saying that he hailed from the year two thousand and thirty-seven, and his stories from the future captured everybody's attention. In the end, he said, it was a war-free world. Whether all these were his imaginary musings was the same question Groszinger has in his mind when Major Rice keeps telling him about the voices he hears in space around him. When Fin narrates what he saw and the massive queue of dead pilots, the others quietly listen. Unlike the amusement that the hospital mates of the narrator in 'Great Day' feel when they hear his stories or the disbelief that Groszinger has when he hears Major Rice, Fin's mates simply listen in absolute silence as though there might be a hint of doubt, somewhere deep in their

hearts, they believe and long for the place Fin had witnessed. Just as Fin wanted to descend into that field, so did his mates, for they felt this would be the only apparent end to their pain. Encounters with death and with the deadevoke the strangest reactions in men. Major rice passes out and eventually dies when he hears the voice of his dead wife in Thanasphere. He loses all interest in coming back to the world of the living, back to the world of wars. The narrator in *Great Day* loses his understanding of the natural and unreal, lost forever in nineteen hundred and eighteen, which might have marked the end of the first great war but was not too far away from a second. And Fin, he kept on waiting for the day when that cloud would come once again and take him into the land of the dead forever. Soon after Fin's disappearance and reappearance from the world of the living, he had another encounter with a cloud, albeit a black one this time, the one which would finally transport him to the land of the dead. The narrator in 'They Shall Not Grow Old' recalls his last moments with Fin:

I was close to him when his aircraft caught fire. ... There was black smoke coming from the exhaust of his hurricane. I flew up close and called, 'You'd better jump.' His voice came back, calm and slow. 'It's not so easy.'

...

'I'm a bit shot up. My arms are shot up, and I can't undo the straps.'

...

For a moment, his aircraft flew on, straight and level, then gently, like a dying eagle, it dipped a wing and dived towards the sea. I watched as it went; I watched the trail of black smoke that it made across the sky, and as I watched, Fin's voice came again over the radio, clear and slow. 'I'm a lucky bastard,' he

was saying. 'A lucky, lucky bastard.' (Dahl, "They," 230)

Death comes as a redeemer even to the old ex-pilot who did not wish to die until the moment when he did. Dahl adds his touch of a comedic uncanny as he describes a post-death scene.

"Nothing will worry me anymore now, nothing, nothing; not even that man splashing in the pond over there." ... "He seems to be dragging something out of the pond, something heavy." ... "How funny; it's a body. It's a body of a man. As a matter of fact, I think it's me." (Dahl, "Death," 301)

The spectral being sees the man taking the pipe, money, and watch from his dead body. Seeing the excitement of the man, the ghost whispers in his ear, "Why don't you relax a bit?" (Dahl, "Death," 302). The man jumps in fear and starts to run. "I've never seen a man look as frightened as that." (Dahl, "Death," 301), says the ghost narrator as he sees the man running frantically and looking back over his shoulders again and again. The ghost decides not to follow him. He was at peace. The thing about death in war fields is that nobody dies unhappy. Death is only a redeemer. Be it for the warriors themselves as in "Thanasphere," where rice deliberately crashes his rocket in space to unite with his dead wife, or the relatives of warriors like the mother in "Only This," who envisions being in the cockpit with his dying son moments before she dies in her rocking chair years after her son's death.

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