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Allie Vugrincic
Denison University

H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine*: Beyond Science and Fiction

By Allie Vugrincic

A weary, red sun rises over a distant planet—or perhaps our own planet, thousands of years in the future—as the new mankind breathes in the crystalline air of their pristine society. A rocket burns a pathway against a background of stars. Science challenges the human mind's potential ability to travel in time and space. There is something utterly captivating in an idea that can inspire the reader to look beyond themselves into a universe overflowing with fantastic or horrific possibilities—possibilities that seem just barely beyond the longing grasp of humanity. This is the essence of the literary genre of science fiction, a genre defined by its exploration of the seemingly impossible via the expansion of modern technology. Science fiction is willing to go beyond the boundaries of time and space to transport readers into the distant future, to new planets, and even to alternate realities.

The genre was introduced in the mid-1600s with the fantasy work *The Blazing World* by Margret Cavendish and born in its modern form in 1818 with the publication of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. As a social force, it draws much of its power from its tendency to become "a mirror of common opinion" in popular realms of critical thought, and the ability to expand those commonly held ideas into something magnificent and enduring.[51] It is also a genre that by its very nature is heavily influenced by the time period from which it came: the nineteenth century, a time of scientific discovery and expanding technology, where Social Darwinism was an emerging notion and Romanticism a lingering ideal. These concepts came together and manifested themselves in literary works that strove to question the limits of human ingenuity and

[51] Robert H. West, "Science Fiction and Its Ideas" *The Georgia Review 15*, no. 3 (October 1, 1961): 278.
Carl D. Malmgren, Worlds Apart: Narratology of Science Fiction (Indianapolis, Indiana University Press 1991), 2.

social structure. No preceding genre so beautifully combined the ethical and aesthetic to achieve a social commentary on the increasing possibilities for good and evil.[52] The complex social atmosphere in which science fiction developed allowed for a diverse range of topics to be explored—from the moral qualms of technology to the prospects of exploration. In an age of progress where ideas were moving faster than they ever had before, change became a constant rule.[53] Science fiction, as a "form of enlightened social critique" likewise adopted, or rather was founded upon, this same view.[54]

One of the foremost literary masters of nineteenth century science fiction, Herbert George Wells, saw the unprecedented rate of change as the defining characteristic of the nineteenth century. He wrote several works dealing with said change, including his 1901 non-fiction, *Anticipations of the Reaction of Mechanical and Scientific Progress upon Human Life and Thought*.[55] Wells, known for being a man "not pleased with the world he lived in," did not leave his fascination with the future of mankind exclusively in non-fiction.[56] Instead, Wells used his knowledge of nineteenth century science to enhance his fictional glimpse at the fate of mankind in his work *The Time Machine.* Written in 1895, *The Time Machine* showcases Wells's masterful marriage of the Romantic ideals of his Victorian England to the popular debates of scientific and human change. These conditions culminate in a work that critiques social behavior and humanity.

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[52] Paul K. Alkon, *Science Fiction Before 1900: Imagination Discovers Technology* (New York, Twayne Publishers, 1994), xi.
[53] Malmgren, *Worlds Apart: Narratology of Science Fiction*, 5.
[54] Peter Y. Paik, *From Utopia to Apocalypse: Science Fiction and the Politics of Catastrophe* Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 3.
[55] Alkon, *Science Fiction Before 1900: Imagination Discovers Technology,* 15.
[56] J. Kagarlitski, *The Life and Thought of H. G. Wells*, translated by Moura Budberg (New York: Barnes&Nobles, 1966), xi.

A Genre of Social Critique

Wells favored the use of fiction as an avenue for political and social commentary. He believed the duty of a fiction author was "to be the social mediator" and "instrument of self-examination" for the masses.[57] Science fiction, a genre partially founded by Wells, allowed him to pose questions regarding the social status quo to an emerging audience of readers who commonly lacked the ability to understand life outside of their experience. With fiction, Wells was able to present these complex and sometimes abstract ideas to audiences in a way which was easy to grasp.[58] Science fiction especially proved to be useful in assessing such intellectual aspects of life, as science validated fiction and gave educated audiences a rational vehicle for stories of the impossible.[59]

Wells takes readers to the year 802,701; a time long past the height of human society, when man has devolved and split into two starkly different races—the beautiful and helpless Eloi, and the horrifying ape-like Morlocks. These two descendants of man become a vehicle for Wells's sermon on the progression of humanity, in which he lays out problems of his time with the fatalism of science fiction.[60] Fatalism here refers to the inescapable progression of the world due to humans and nature. This idea becomes a theme that grows throughout the journey of Wells's protagonist, the Time Traveler. Though never the foreground of critique, Well's does invite the reader to consider fate as a fixed entity, and perhaps even to question if it can be changed.

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[57] Alkon, Science Fiction Before 1900: Imagination Discovers Technology, 8.
"Mr. H. G. Wells on Novels." *The Times of India* (1861-Current). February 14, 1912, sec. http://0search.proquest.com.dewey2.library.denison.edu/hnptimesofindia/docview/231293091/citation/1424F79B85948E6CFB/9?accountid=10474.
[58] Kagarlitski, *The Life and Thought of H. G. Wells*, Budberg translation, 21.
[59] Alkon, *Science Fiction Before 1900: Imagination Discovers Technology,* 49
[60] West, "Science Fiction and Its Ideas": 278.

More prevalently, however, Wells's *Time Machine* deals with newly developed social classes that divided his nineteenth century society. Upon his first encounter with the Eloi, "very beautiful and graceful creature[s]," the Time Traveler describes the being's frail beauty.[61] Slight in stature—no more than four feet tall—and "clad in a purple tunic" the first Eloi the Time Traveler meets is classified as "the more beautiful kind of consumptive" creating an immediate association with luxury.[62] The creature's beauty, as well as the later observed "peculiarities in their Dresden-china type of prettiness" is attributed to an aristocratic lineage.[63] This parallel to the upper-class of Wells's time encourages one to contemplate the class system; the idea of the "consumptive" seems to chide the bourgeoisie for their extravagance, as the image of purple robes invokes memories of ancient kings.

The Eloi alone, however, are not enough to truly provide a criticism of social structure; it takes the appearance of the second, more animalistic descendant of man to create a critique of the Victorian class system. The Morlocks, a subterranean species contrast the Eloi's representation of the upper class by standing in for the working class in Wells's year 802,701. The Time Traveler characterizes the Morlocks much like animals: "it was a dull white, and had strange large grayish-red eyes; also [there was] flaxen hair on its head and down its back."[64] The Time Traveler aligns the Morlocks' pale skin and lack of beauty with their apparent decent from the working class, who, the Time Traveler supposes, were forced underground so that the upper world could remain free of the eyesores of industry. The Morlocks, like their proletariat ancestors, toil to create the products "necessary to the comfort of the daylight race."[65] It is in this way that Wells, via his Time Traveler, presents a tale of a complete social schism that resulted in

[61] H. G. Wells, *The Time Machine* (New York: Bantam Classics, 2003), 26.
[62] Ibid.
[63] Ibid, 28.
[64] Ibid, 55.
[65] Ibid, 57.

the development of two completely different species: "The gradual widening" of the gap between laborers and capitalists is declared the "key to the whole position," reinforcing the fatalism of the novel by suggesting this breakdown is inevitable if the class system remains in place.[66] This eventuality is an unavoidable consequence of human nature; the "real aristocracy," the Time Traveler witnesses is a "logical conclusion of the industrial system" of the nineteenth century.[67]

The inescapable fate of mankind to evolve in such a way brings into focus a second nineteenth century issue that Wells eagerly dissects through the juxtaposition of the Morlocks and the Eloi: Social Darwinism. This is a concept that can be traced back to the late 1870s and would have been a highly discussed topic during Wells's lifetime.[68] It is no surprise, then, that distinct references to Darwin's evolutionary theory appear in *The Time Machine*. Wells applies Darwinian Theory to man, both as a social creature and as an animal with the basic ability to adapt. With a scientific perspective, Wells's Time Traveler considers the aspects of evolution that would have resulted in the human species' degeneration and split into two humanoid remnants.

The frailty of the Eloi is easily attributed to an adaptation to a lifestyle free of conflict, disease, and danger. As daily life for the Eloi no longer requires the strength to overcome struggles, those who were once considered weak become equal with the strong and "are indeed no longer weak."[69] The Eloi are also characterized as unintelligent, though well-meaning, beings. The Time Traveler remarks on their carefree attitude and considers their disinterest in

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[66] Ibid, 58.
[67] Ibid, 59.
[68] Paul Crook, "Social Darwinism: The Concept." *History of European Ideas* 22, no. 4 (July 1996): 261.
[69] Wells, *The Time Machine*, 39.

him a mark of lower intellect.[70] The Time Traveler is taken aback when he is asked by an Eloi if he and his time machine came from a thunderstorm, "a question that showed him to be on the intellectual level of our five-year-old children."[71] The Eloi's intelligence, the Time Traveler reasons, is diminished because they are not plagued with solving problems. Wells harkens to scientific Darwinism as the Time Traveler remarks on the necessity of change for the existence of intellect:

> "It is a law of nature that we overlook, that intellectual versatility is the compensation for change, danger, and trouble. An animal perfectly in harmony with its environment is a perfect mechanism. Nature never appealed to intelligence until habit and instinct are useless. There is no intelligence where there is no change and no need of change. Only those animals partake of intelligence that have to meet a huge variety of needs and dangers."[72]

In the wake of a perfect harmony with nature, idleness becomes the Eloi's poison, causing the downfall of humanity from the inquisitive exploration of the nineteenth century to child's play in 802,701. The Eloi have no need for intelligence, so it is lost.

The Time Traveler invokes social Darwinism when he suggests that this process of degeneration due to lack of stimulant was a "logical consequence" of an artificial environment of stability. Wells's argument becomes multilayered when he also calls attention to the "civilising mission" which may refer to civilization within Europe, but certainly is reminiscent to the "mission" of imperialism, which was at its height in the late nineteenth century:[73] Well's Time Traveler remarks on the "odd consequence of the social effort in which we are at present engaged," where the social effort is the attempted civilizing of peoples considered to be brutish

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[70] Ibid, 33.
[71] Ibid, 29.
[72] Ibid, 97.
[73] Robin J. Winks and Joan Neuberger, *Europe and the Making of Modernity* (New York: Oxford, 2005), 257.

and the consequence, strangely enough, is the creation of a feeble society.[74] This brief reference to imperialism may be an extension of Wells's social criticism beyond the physical boundaries of Europe to condemn the disruption of the natural evolution of society caused by Europeans interactions with peoples of "less advanced" areas. Indeed, this would be in line with his prediction of humanity's over-civilization. It is likely Wells simply saw this as an opportunity to enhance his overall theory about the progression of society. Wells also touches on his recurring theme of fatalism with the remark that "security sets a premium on feebleness" and such a secure society will inevitably degrade intellectually and physically.[75]

On the other side of the Wells's new spectrum of humanity, the Morlocks stand not feeble, but animalistic. Already mentioned was the Time Traveler's supposition that the Morlocks became subterranean after industry was sent below ground. Naturally the Morlocks developed pale skin and the climbing skills required to ascend and descend the long ladders that link them to the surface. Furthering the theme of evolution to adapt to the environment, the Morlocks have developed an ability to see in the dark and an extreme aversion to sunlight as a result of their underground existence. The Morlocks, otherwise slighted by this evolutionary process, are endowed with one remnant of human ingenuity that their aboveground relatives lack: due to their continued contact with machinery, the Morlocks retained some rudimentary intelligence required to do their work.[76] The Time Traveler realizes this slight evolutionary advantage is hugely beneficial to the Morlocks, who are revealed in a startling moment to be cannibalistically preying on the defenseless Eloi.

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[74] Wells, *The Time Machine*, 36.
[75] Ibid.
[76] John S. Partington, "'The Time Machine' and 'A Modern Utopia': The Static and Kinetic Utopias of the Early H.G. Wells." Utopian Studies 13, no. 1 (June 2002): 62.
Wells, *The Time Machine*, 97.

Victorian Romanticism in *The Time Machine*

In addition to the blatant social critiques of Victorian England, Wells adopted another nineteenth century ideal—one that became prevalent in science fiction—Romanticism. From the lofty descriptions of architecture to the sentiment of a lost time and the ravenous images of nature reclaiming the world, Wells shrouds his critique in beautiful Romantic reflection. *The Time Machine*, as well as a few of Wells's other early works, have been deemed 'scientific romances' by literary scholars, as well as by Wells himself.[77] The idea of scientific romance may on the surface appear contradictory as Romanticism is often viewed as the artistic rebuttal to the Enlightenment's love of scientific advancement, an idea that is a cornerstone of science fiction. However Romanticism was not a complete dismissal of science in favor of art and human thought; rather it was a movement that hoped to use the discovery and empowerment of the Enlightenment to advance human understanding and feeling.[78] Science and Romanticism were never mutually exclusive, and in some of its varied forms the latter actually was built upon the former. One must also take into account that Wells was writing after the height of both movements, at a time when it was possible to bring the two together as an entirely new idea. Likewise, the science in Wells's science fiction is not entirely empirical—it is often downplayed to the point of acting as a "device" to perpetuate the message of the story.[79] In this case, a message more in line with Romantic ideals.

Much of the Romanticism in Wells's *Time Machine* is motivated by a rejection of industrialization. The Morlocks, which represent everything the Time Traveler fears, are aligned with technology and industrialization; they are beings of "mere mechanical industry" banished,

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[77] Alkon, *Science Fiction Before 1900: Imagination Discovers Technology*, 7.
[78] Winks and Neuberger, *Europe and the Making of Modernity*, 42.
[79] Malmgren, *Worlds Apart: Narratology of Science Fiction*, 14.

in the futuristic society, to the underground with other horrible things.[80] This continued commentary on the Morlocks' industrial prowess sustains the plot and progress the story while adding to Wells's argument about the potential destructiveness of the class system and playing into the Romanticism of the novel. Industrialization was a topic Romantics found interesting because it represented a significant change in day to day life. Some favored the bleakness of industrial towns, clouded with smog and the lives of thousands of workers crammed together, while other Romantics feared industrialization because it was a further departure from the beloved days of old.[81]

The Romantic battle between the glory of industry and the sentimentality of nature is represented in the aesthetic differences between the Morlocks and Eloi, and echoed in Wells's intense imagery of nature reclaiming the world from man. As industrialization claimed expanses of Europe throughout the nineteenth century, many romantics became concerned with the destruction of nature caused by growing cities.[82] People were becoming more isolated from nature, which became "an abstract consumer product," that was more an outside force than something the common man understood.[83] One of the many romantic views of the century was the belief that nature would eventually dominate over man, as it had in the past. Wells's Time Traveler expresses the same sentiment as he describes the "condition of ruinous splendor" in which he finds the world:[84]

> "A little way up the hill…was a great heap of granite, bound together by masses of aluminum, a vast labyrinth of precipitous walls and crumbled heaps, amidst which were

[80] Wells, *The Time Machine*, 98.
[81] Winks and Nerburger, *Europe and the Making of Modernity,* 83.
[82] Winks and Neuberger, *Europe and the Making of Modernity,* 42.
[83] Peter Heymans, *Animality in British Romanticism: The Aesthetics of Species* (New York, Routledge, 2012), 20.
[84] Wells, *The Time Machine*, 33.

> very beautiful pagoda-like plants…It was evidently the derelict remains of some vast structure…"[85]

All the great forces of nature slowly reclaim the landscape that man once made great. Eventually, as the Time Traveler takes another leap into the future beyond 802,701, nature is all that is left in a silent world: "It would be hard to convey the stillness of it. All the sounds of Man, the bleating of sheep, the cries of birds, the hum of insects, the stir that makes the background of our lives—all that was over."[86] Man as a species is ultimately lost as the planet lives its final days; another inescapable fate for humanity that plays so well into the web of critique Wells has spun.

Nature's repossession of the world at the end of the planet's lifetime also demonstrates another Romantic quality of the novel which is unrelated to industrialization. The Romantics of the nineteenth century loved to focus on the extraordinary moments of human experience; namely, life and death. This grand death of the planet and disappearance of the human race is arguably the greatest extreme in the history of the planet since its formation. Wells, in a moment of supreme Romanticism, allows his readers a fleeting glimpse at the end of time.

The Message of H. G. Wells: What Makes us Human?

Wells takes his readers all the way to the end of time to pose hard-hitting questions concerning social behavior, evolution, and the consequences of human nature. At the same time, *The Time Machine* inadvertently set up a road map of the nineteenth century, from lingering Enlightenment ideals to Romanticism, industrialization to social Darwinism, and the growth of the divide between capitalist and laborer—all while establishing the trademarks of a developing genre, of which H. G. Wells was a founder. When viewed as a whole clear connections between

[85] Ibid.
[86] Ibid, 105.

social critiques, trademarks of the time period, and the genre itself arise and establish the uniqueness of science fiction as a literary power. *The Time Machine* manages to serve as a mirror of its time and record of history while flinging readers into the distant future. Perhaps most importantly it invites the readers to contemplate topics from social class to industrialization, romanticism and the very nature of humanity.

One late nineteenth century fan of Wells remarked that the novelist believed "that human nature in books should be no more pliant than it is in life."[87] Indeed Wells enthusiastically examines the nature of mankind's fictional descendants—but can these descendants be considered human at all? In examining and criticizing the world, Wells unintentionally sets up parameters for humanity. Though Wells never directly poses the question 'what makes a human?' in *The Time Machine* he certainly dances around the idea. As the Time Traveler, who is never endowed with a name, first encounters the Eloi he is taken aback by their incredible frailty, likeness to one another, and lack of intelligence; he easily considers them less advanced than his contemporaries and deems their lower existence "humanity on the wane."[88] The Morlocks, despite the remnant of their human ingenuity, are viewed even less favorably by Wells's Time Traveler, as "it was impossible, somehow, to feel any humanity in the things."[89] He goes on to remark that the "sickening quality of the Morlocks," makes them "inhuman and malign" and suggests that through their apparent adoption of cannibalism they have lost the instinct and intelligence that separates humans from their animal cousins.[90]

Wells suggests that true humanity is something beyond simple ancestry and pure science. There is an intangible aspect of humanity that distinguishes mankind from the rest of the animal

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[87] Jones, W. Handley, "The Message of Mr. H. G. Wells," The Living Age (1897-1941), July 31, 1915.
[88] Wells, *The Time Machine*, 36.
[89] Ibid, 82.
[90] Ibid, 69.
Ibid, 76.

kingdom. To be human, it seems, involves intelligence and inspiration, the drive to create and the power to destroy; it is "the loyal alliance of capable men," built throughout history with "self-restraint, patience and decision."[91] Humanity is freedom and struggle, thought and desire. For Wells, the tragedy is that this glorious humanity is fleeting, doomed by a fatalistic universe to eventually be extinguished by the inhuman duration of time.[92] *The Time Machine* is, in many ways, a tale of humanity adrift in an apparently meaningless world.[93] From the Time Traveler's continual search for understanding in the future to the "sunset of mankind" depicted in the last days of Earth and the futility of arbitrary class distinctions, Wells seems to be wondering how man, the feeble species that is so easily infected with change, fits into the story of the universe.[94]

Wells confronts this readers with startling questions and leaves only vague answers. What, then, does it mean to be human? Is humanity as changing as the quick-paced industry of the nineteenth century, and as fleeting as the Eloi's intelligence? Wells laid out the puzzle pieces on the table and attempted to guide his readers as they put those pieces together, but ultimately it is left to each individual to find their own meaning. What may be said is this: not all hope is lost for mankind. It is the fatalistic nature of the novel which inspires the belief that the future does not have to look like Wells's year 802,701. Wells warns again and again that the Eloi and Morlocks' separation is due to the widening gap between the capitalists and laborers. He reminds readers that a life saturated with leisure will degrade the mind, and he remarks on the overwhelming power of nature against man. All this in the hopes that his readers will see the bleak future to which they have condemned themselves and attempt to make amends before it is too late. Certainly Wells's humanity is fated to disintegrate into nothingness, but only because it

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[91] Ibid, 38.
[92] Alkon, Science Fiction Before 1900: Imagination Discovers Technology, 50
[93] Ibid, 51.
[94] Wells, *The Time Machine*, 36.

lies on an ill-built foundation. If even one aspect of society was changed, certainly the entire future of humanity would find a new path. Abolish the class system and humanity never separates into two sub-human species. Continue to work hard and mankind will be strong. Recognize the need for balance with nature, and nature will not overtake the world.

Understand man is flawed, and the future is what we make it.

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