H.G. Wells

Introduction

Herbert George Wells was born September 21, 1866, the youngest child to Sarah and Joseph Wells. Both were employed by a well-off family, known as the Fetherstonhaughs (Joseph as a gardener and Sarah as a maid), so Wells grew up with his family living in the “servants’ quarters” in back of the estate. Nevertheless, Wells’ education was well-founded even in childhood. He was taught to read and write by his mother, and then attended Bromley Academy for several years. He moved on in his teenage years to work as a pharmaceutical assistant, and later as a science teacher as he progressed into adulthood. His areas of interest included Romantic Poetry, Enlightenment satire, evolutionary science, and utopian thought. These are prevalent themes in many of his writings, including The Time Machine. His first published piece was "The Chronic Argonauts", a short story that was a very early version of what would later become The Time Machine. It appeared in the Science Schools Journal in the spring of 1888. After suffering multiple subsequent rejections for his scientific essays, he found his forte in short stories and humorous essays as well as literary reviews. In 1895, The Time Machine appeared for the first time in book form, and was an instant success. He published multiple other novels in quick succession, including The Time Machine, to semi-realistic futurological storylines. He also wove in controversial topics such as capitalism, communism, nationalism, imperialism, and religion into his stories, incorporating his interest in social discordance.

Although we cannot attribute the creation of such a vast genre of literature to one man alone, H.G. Wells is often considered one of the “fathers of science fiction.” And Wells himself once wrote, “Leaders should lead as far as they can and then vanish. Their ashes should not choke the fire they have lit.” True to his word, Wells stoked the fire so that the genre of science fiction would continue to grow and flourish long after his death.

Wells’ real ambition, however, was to be seen by the public not only as a novelist but also as a scientist and an intellectual. He published many social and technological papers throughout his lifetime, and his later novels moved less from the fantastical, like The Time Machine, to semi-realistic storylines. He also wove in controversial topics such as capitalism, communism, nationalism, imperialism, and religion into his stories, incorporating his interest in social discordance.

Sources used include the Dictionary of Literary Biography and Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, as referenced in "Resources and Links" below.

Page Credit: Tony Melchiorri, Monica Reardon, and Breana Shelton

Topics for Discussion

One of the anxieties of the Fin De Siecle was the idea of the “meaning of life.” In the introduction, The Time Machine is described as “practically dismissing the significance of the whole of human history” (12). Do you think the novel does this? If so, how?

Darwin’s The Origin of Species was published in 1859, and The Time Machine in 1895, which clearly expresses some of the anxieties that Darwin’s theory of evolution brought about. First of all, how is this anxiety most obviously manifested? Do you think the novel is either accepting or refuting Darwin’s theory?

Going back to the previous question, human civilization does indeed seem to have evolved in the future presented in The Time Machine, and it has evolved into two very distinct branches. What are we to make of this? We are given the Time Traveller’s reason for this split (109-11), but why do you think this branching off of humanity is even written into the novel at all?

When you consider the Time Traveller’s theory for this splitting of the human species, do you think there is a point being made? What does this say about work versus latency? This may also make suggestions about our human ideals. We are obsessed with making things easier and faster. What does this novel seem to suggest about these ideals?

In the beginning of the novel we are introduced, albeit briefly, to characters such as “the Medical Man”, “the Very Young Man”, and “the Editor”. Even the Time Traveller himself is not named. Why is this? If you compare some of their reactions to the Time Traveller’s claim to have created a working time-machine, are some of them similar to one another? If so, what does it say about those characters who hold similar opinions? Do they also have similar occupations/statuses? Why do you think this is?

H.G. Wells was fascinated by technological advancement. Of course, the Time Traveller mentions that he has “a weakness for mechanisms” (129) throughout the novel, and he immediately straps into his untested time machine. What do you make of Wells’ view on technology? What are the inherent risks of technology? Are the rapid advances of science, which we may not completely understand, worth the costs?

In the next section, “Form is Content”, it is mentioned that in the future the Time Traveller visits, the earth seems to have become a garden like the Garden of Eden. It is written in Genesis that in the Garden, fruit and other vegetation grow spontaneously without any need of man to tend it. It is only when Adam and Eve are cast out of the garden that they must begin to work and to “till the earth,” and it is only then that they really begin to learn and progress as human beings. What are we to make of this similarity? As we discover, this world is hardly Eden, as the Morlocks wait to prey upon the Eloi each night. That being said, the more interesting question is perhaps this: What, if anything, are we to make of this glaring difference between this “garden” and the biblical garden?

All quotes were taken from the Broadview edition of The Time Machine, as referenced in "Resources and Links" below.
You see I had always anticipated that the people of the year Eight Hundred and Two Thousand odd would be incredibly in front of us in knowledge, art, and everything. Then one of them suddenly asked me a question that showed him to be on the intellectual level of one of our five-year-old children (83).

The Time Traveller comments on a common misconception that we all share - that the future does not necessarily mean progress. In fact, the human species appears to have gone down the opposite path of technological evolution instead of being "incredibly in front of us." People have conquered nature and society; they have nothing left to do but revert back to the mentality of five-year-old children. "Knowledge, art, and everything" is lacking when people are not faced with the challenges of taming the environment, nature, and society.

There were no hedges, no signs of proprietary rights, no evidences of agriculture; the whole earth had become a garden (90).

Interestingly, this quote makes a number of important allusions. The most evident is the lack of individuality and property ownership since there were "no hedges, no signs of proprietary rights." Humans apparently have no need to work anymore to find food, as there are "no evidences of agriculture."

Another important aspect is that of evolution. Humans have transformed the world and directed the evolution of the earth and themselves. Strangely, though, this appears to have brought them to a standstill and degeneration. It appears as though "the whole earth had become a garden" much like that described in the Biblical story of creation - the earth had been transformed into Eden by humans in The Time Machine.

Under the new conditions of perfect comfort and security, that restless energy, that with us is strength, would become weakness (92).

As with the reverse of technological evolution, the Time Traveller notices that biological de-evolution has occurred as well. "That restless energy, that with us is strength" is no longer utilized, nor is it necessary. People are no longer faced with the challenges that individuals during Victorian (and modern) times faced. Without these challenges, strifes, and problems in human beings' lives, people are not motivated to progress intellectually or physically. They simply have no need. Time takes its toll on their comfortable lives as they dilapidate into childish versions of our current conception of a human.

Very simple was my explanation, and plausible enough - as most wrong theories are (93)!

After trying to comprehend the lifestyles of the Eloi, the Time Traveller concludes that they have developed into a degenerated communist society with no need for intellectual development, art, war, or strength; however, he also acknowledges that his "very simple" explanation was wrong "as most theories are." He supports the common scientific method that a scientist should work to prove a theory wrong; a theory can only be proved right after every possible attempt to prove it wrong fails. This was a developing method during the Victorian era that has become common amongst prominent scientists, technologists, and students of the sciences today. It also challenges us to be skeptical of new ideas no matter how perfect they seem. Wells makes it evident that skepticism is a healthy way to approach problems, theories, and knowledge.

I had made myself the most complicated and the most hopeless trap that ever a man devised (99).

In an ironic set of circumstances, the Time Traveller loses his time machine. He sought so much for travelling to the future that he forgot to take careful considerations so that he could return to the present. He traps himself in a land, time, and society that he doesn't belong to and has no chance of escape unless he finds the machine that brought him into this trap of time.

Even now, does not an Eastend worker live in such artificial conditions as practically to be cut off from the natural surface of the earth (110)?

The Time Traveller compares the Morlocks with the "Eastend worker" living in poverty. In his theory, he believes the Morlocks descended from the lower class laborers forced to work in factories, mines, and other dark, toilsome jobs. The Eloi have the ability to travel around the "natural surface of the earth" because they originated from the upper class. The Time Traveller postulates that upper class individuals relied on the the lower class to provide for them and had plenty of free time to enjoy activities and pleasures on the surface of earth while the lower class toiled further and further below earth until they became a divided species. This interesting theory provides both allusions to evolution in the separation of the human species and arguments revolving around the separation of classes.

I thought of the great precessional cycle that the pole of the earth describes. Only forty times had that silent revolution occurred during all the years that I had traversed. And during these few revolutions all the activity, all the traditions, the complex organizations, the nations, languages, literatures, aspirations, even the mere memory of Man as I knew him, had been swept out of existence (123).
Comparing the enormous changes of humanity and life on earth, along with the drastic evolution of nature, the Time Traveller notes the insignificance of the span of human life in the overall scheme of the Universe. “Traditions, the complex organizations, the nations, languages, literatures, aspirations, even the mere memory of Man” hardly existed during the few revolutions of the earth’s pole. All the time and effort that it took for humans to develop those facets of culture and society mean almost nothing to the revolution of the earth and fluxes of the galaxy.

He, I know - for the the question had been discussed among us long before the Time Machine was made - thought but cheerlessly of the Advancement of Mankind, and saw in the growing pile of civilization only a foolish heaping that must be inevitably fall back upon and destroy its makers in the end (155).

The Time Traveller proved this idea that civilization only grows to its own destruction by visiting the future. All the advancements that were made actually brought society closer to collapse - “the growing pile of civilization only a foolish heaping.” Each step to control the environment and livelihood of humans also meant another challenge that human beings no longer had to face. This naturally means that humans have less and less to worry about; because of this, humans no longer need the strict and enormous construction of organization, technology, languages, and governments when they have conquered all that civilization was meant to overcome.

All quotes were taken from the Broadview edition of The Time Machine, as referenced in “Resources and Links” below.

Resources and Links


**Additional Materials**

*The Time Machine* Entire Copy of *The Time Machine* available to read online.

*Certain Personal Matters.* This is a collection of personal reflections and essays by Wells, provided in full form without charge by Project Gutenberg.

*A Modern Utopia.* In this book, Wells discusses his social theories and ideals. It is also available through Project Gutenberg.

*HG Wells Interdisciplinary Essays* A collection of essays revolving around H.G. Wells, along with important essays dealing with *The Time Machine*.


*The Origin of Species - Charles Darwin* The complete work of Charles Darwin available online. Darwin's theory of natural selection was an enormous influence in the development of *The Time Machine*.

*Screenplay.* This is the original script for the 1960 film version of *The Time Machine*, written by David Duncan.

*Trailer.* Here you can watch the original trailer for the 1960 film.

*TheTimeMachine_64kb.mp3* This is an audio recording of a Radio Theatre production of *The Time Machine*.

*The Time Machine Project.* This website is an extensive collection of trivia, articles, photographs, and much more, centering on the 1960 film version of *The Time Machine* but also includes information about various other film/theatrical versions and the history of the text itself.

*The Unbroken Thread.* An incredible, visual and musical expression of the ideas of evolution.

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**Portrait**

*Image: Yousuf Karsh @ Wikimedia Commons*
Biography

Hometown: London

1851: The Great Exhibition is held in Crystal Palace in Hyde Park, displaying over 13,000 exhibits featuring the latest inventions, cultural developments, and art from throughout the world and throughout history, ranging from Ancient Egypt to Renaissance Britain and everything in between.

1859: Darwin’s Evolution of Species published; Britain begins mass-producing steel

1863: Britain builds the world’s first subway

September 21, 1866: Henry Wells born at his family’s home in Kent.

1876: Alexander Bell invents the telephone

1878: First public electric lighting installed in London

1879: Wells produces and publishes his first book at the age of 13, a graphic novel entitled The Desert Daisy (see a page in attachments below).

1880: Wells was sent out into the world to study and train as an apprentice.

1888: “The Chronic Argonauts”, precursor to The Time Machine, appears for the first time in print.

1890: Wells earned his Bachelor of Science from the University of London.

1891: Wells married his first wife, cousin Isabel Mary Wells.

1895: Wells divorced Isabel and married Catherine Robbins, a former student.

1897: The Invisible Man first published as a serial novel in Pearson’s Magazine.

1898: War of the Worlds first published serially in Pearson’s Magazine.

1903: Wells’ short story, “The Land Ironclads”, is published, in which he prophesized the idea of the tank and the atomic bomb.

1905: The science of genetics is “founded” by William Bateson

1914: WWI begins; British invent the world’s first aircraft carrier

1932: John Cockcroft and Ernest Walton succeed at splitting the first atom.

1922: Wells ran unsuccessfully for a position in Parliament’s Department of Labor.

1940: Wells’ final fiction piece was published. He would continue to write scientific and philosophical speculative articles until his death.
August 13, 1946: Wells died in his sleep at his home in London.

Timeline built around information from the Dictionary of Literary Biography, the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, and the Brits at their Best website.

Travel Through Time

Footage from the The Time Machine (2002) by Warner Bros. Pictures. Original Youtube video can be found here for the time traveling sequences and here for the teaser trailer.

Image Gallery

Credit: FreeClassicImages.com