

The significance of
scientific investigation
within the works of
h.g. wells' the ...



Scientific investigation as a motif in Victorian literature served as both a source of inquisitiveness and terror in its youth as an ideological school of thought. Both Mary Shelley and H. G. Wells take time to scientifically dissect these facets of horror and experimentation through literature, by questioning the validity of science and its subsequent effect upon society in their contemporary environment and also those in the ages to come. They each provoke the questions of whether science is something to be feared or admired - or even perhaps both - and ultimately ask the question: how far can we really go until science has gone too far?

The subject of logic in science and the supposed incontrovertibility of scientific investigation very much presents itself in both Shelley and Wells' works and serves as a warning of the limits of human knowledge and the differentiation between theory and practical action. Of course, the time traveller is able to practically construct and operate his time machine, however, at no point is the reader presented with any evidence that a significant amount of planning or predetermination went into the journey to the future at all. The reader is not shown a concisely and meticulously conducted experiment, but more a haphazard adventure similar to that of Jonathan Swift's novel *Gulliver's Travels* as a fantastical tale of a man from our human society journeying to alien lands of extraordinary creatures. Should we then, if paralleling these two works, take the time traveller seriously in any of his claims to scientific brilliance? Wells, in his electing to overtly fictionalize the futuristic universe the time traveller finds himself in perhaps intends to poke and prod at science and the scientific methodology as being too fantastical and convoluted to be considered concrete fact. Wells

himself called the Victorian era an age of confusion (Claeys, 107) and so it may instead be that his adoption of a highly fantastical world with a rather slapdash protagonist serves to fundamentally comment on the generation's naivety in the realms of scientific discovery, given that even the term scientist had only been coined in 1833, which is only sixty years prior to the novella. We can see elements of the fantastical being used to possibly warn readers off of the fanciful darkness of elements of the scientific practice again in Shelley's novel *Frankenstein* with the mythological referencing of the tale of Prometheus. Hustis claims that 'Shelley's decision to entitle her novel *Frankenstein*; or, *The Modern Prometheus* suggests a far more complex literary operation than simple appropriation or modified replication of an ancient Greek myth' (Hustis, 845) thus recognizing a direct parallel to mythology and what some may call horrific fantasy. It may be read that Shelley and Wells both adopt this fantastical genre for the same reason - to ward their readerships away from science completely and dismissing it as fantasy - or to the more thoughtful reader, to serve as a reminder of the true capabilities of man and our ability to perhaps create the fantastical with scientific investigation.

Now, this capability to create the fantastical ostensibly holds positive connotations in its primary form, however, in Wells' novel there is an allusion that the level of intellectual creativity surrounding scientific investigation was up for questioning in the early years of this new methodology. The time traveller in the novella is described as being 'one of those men who are too clever to be believed' (Wells, 12) and when read in context of Victorian society, it seems that the same can be said for modern science. Manlove

discusses the criticism of industrialization and scientific advancement in the Victorian era, citing that critics appeal to the idea of the machine as a brutaliser of the human sensibility, the agent of a repressive society that, while it goes forward materially, is the enemy of the individual human spirit' (Manlove, 215). To these critics, scientific investigation was to be feared, perhaps because it explains the before unexplainable and reaches into capabilities that humanity didn't even know it had.

This is where Shelley's presentation of science in the gothic and horror genre comes into play as the commentator of the gothic and horror of anthropological scientific investigation in its extremity and the fabrication of life through science. Taylor discusses the notion that the laboratory settings of much of the gothic fiction of the Victorian era mirrors the preoccupation of the period's with horror and the unknown facets of this new wave of science (Taylor, 17). Shelley seems to advocate the idea that science and an unquenchable thirst for knowledge are intrinsically linked as Victor Frankenstein himself claims ' my father was not scientific and I was left to struggle with a child's blindness, added to a student's thirst for knowledge' (Shelley, 28). Noting the paternal blame placed by Frankenstein may reveal fundamental motive behind the sudden rush of scientific investigation in the Victorian period if we are to consider the fathers and ancestor societies to be scientifically ignorant in comparison to the illuminations of modern science. Shelley may perhaps be alluding to the dangers of the arrogance and castigating ideology of new wave individuals of any given subject that they are more intellectual and innovative than any others that have come before them.

Robert Philmus' presupposition that 'Wells designs the fiction to be precisely what its title says it is - a time machine' and that the novella itself acts as a vessel for transporting its contemporary and also modern day readers outside the realms of their environmental thought. This is followed with the hypothesis that there are concrete rules that humanity 'accept unthinkingly' and remain in our unconscious (Philmus, 430), thus while the mode of scientific investigation undertaken in the plot of Wells' novella may be more than questionable in method, this is besides the fundamentally point of what is being communicated to the readership. We as modern readers, along with our Victorian counterparts in Wells' own time are asked to look forward and to examine both the pragmatics and morality of our present societal structures. If Wells is to be read as the voice of the time traveller, there are instances of direct reflection on his part on the linear aspect of society's ritualistic facets. The time traveller quips that the elois' adoption of a kind of gender fluidity and lack of gender specialization in their society is something that 'we see some beginnings of this even in our own time, and in this future age it was complete' (Wells, 30). This statement of the time traveller further cements Philmus' allusion to Wells' manipulation of the motif of scientific investigation, in that it is perhaps necessary to consider the long term effect of the structures in place for future generations and thus he holds it in good standing. It is important to note, however, that the time traveller completely disregards this finding in immediately claiming that 'later I was to appreciate how far it fell short of the reality', which in turn does shift concentration onto scientific investigation as being extremely susceptible to the subjectivity of human error. This opens up a stark juxtaposition in ideology on the part of Wells and thus creates a qualm over the reliability

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and promise of scientific investigation as an idea is put forward and promptly dismissed even within the spaces of a few lines in the pages of the novella.

While Shelley and Wells both point out and dissect the dangers and human accountability in scientific investigation, overall the argument can be summarized through appealing to Wells' own novella and his own ideas surrounding the reliability of science and its methodology. Wells presents us with the time traveller in darkness with the Morlocks and as he scrabbles around to light a match by which to see he comments that 'the view I had of it [his surroundings] was as much as one could see in the burning of a match' (Wells, 54). This concentration upon the small light given off by the match amongst the abyss of darkness perhaps alludes to the idea that no matter how much one finds out through investigation, there will always be more to discover in the darkness. Now, whether Wells means to communicate this as a positive or negative message is inconceivable, however both eventualities result in an illuminating notion about the construct of the human psyche; whilst always wanting to know more, we are also afraid of what this more is made up of and what it will mean for us.

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