

# How the theme of social progress is presented in 'the time machine'

[Literature](#)



'The Time Machine' was published in 1895. It was set in 1899 at the turn of the Century. Invention, scientific theories, machinery and evolution were becoming matters of public interest. With the Century nearing its close, Einstein's theory of relativity nearing its completion, Darwin's theory on evolution and the Industrial Revolution gave Wells a perfect edge of publishing his latest work.

Other 'fin de siecle' writers were also exploring the idea of man as a species was in decline such as: Stoker who wrote 'Dracula' and Stevenson who wrote 'The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde'. Wells possibly had the upper hand though, as time travel stories were becoming progressively more popular in late Victorian literature.

Scientific theories and ideas would be discussed in very distinct social circles. For example, during the opening two chapters 'The Time Machine' is introduced through scientific discussion among his dinner guests.

Wells came from a deprived background and lived in poverty. He spent most of his time in the basement at his parents shop. This is possibly where he got the idea for the 'sunless world' in which the Morlocks were to inhabit.

While Wells was still young his father's business failed and his mother became the housekeeper in Uppark mansion. He spent most of his time moving around in the basement of the mansion through a labyrinth of tunnels reserved for the servants. This probably influenced his description of the underworld inhabited by the Morlocks. These tunnels were used as a popular feature of 'fin de siecle' to describe the unspeakable, such as cannibalism, homosexuality etc.

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During Wells time there was a rigid class system. He had direct experience of the unfairness of the class system at the turn of the century. There were huge social contrasts between the upper and lower classes. He saw the upper classes as pampered and lazy, living increasingly for pleasure. The lower classes were factory workers, servants etc. The servants would always remain unseen through these tunnels, which they inhabited.

The Industrial Revolution was a time of dramatic change, from hand tools and handmade items, to products which were mass produced by machines. Workers became more productive, and since more items were manufactured, prices dropped, making exclusive and hard to make items available to the poor and not only the rich and elite. Life generally improved, but the industrial revolution also proved harmful. Pollution increased, working conditions were harmful, and capitalists employed women and young children, making them work long and hard hours for poor wages. This led to the rise of Trade Unions. Workers were dissatisfied with the poor wages, long hard hours and harmful working conditions.

Wells advocated radical social change. He was an early socialist with radical views, which many people did not agree with. He was very much influenced by his political thinking.

After a basic education at a local school, Wells was apprenticed as a draper. He disliked the work and in 1883 became a pupil-teacher at Midhurst Grammar School. While at Midhurst he won a scholarship to the School of Science where he was taught biology by T. H. Huxley. Huxley was a zoologist and geologist. He found Huxley an inspiring teacher and as a result

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developed a strong interest in science. Wells was disappointed with the teaching he received in the second year and so in 1887 he left without obtaining a degree.

This scientific background allowed Wells to relate to other scientific work developed at the time, which influenced the way in which he wrote. Two of the scientists who influenced him were Darwin and Einstein.

Darwin a famous scientist, had published a book in 1859 called 'The Origin of Species', which explained his theory of evolution. He said all species have to evolve to suit the conditions they live in, 'those that adapt, survive, those that don't die out.' Evolution is the plot of 'The Time Machine'. The time traveller wants to see how man evolves and the reasons for its result.

Einstein's theory of relativity stated that 'particles that travel at a velocity greater than the speed of light time slows down'. This meant that time travel was possible.

'The Time Machine' is set in two narratives, these are: firstly the opening two chapters and the last chapter is told by one of the dinner guests in third person. The story is told by the time traveller in first person, this to some effect makes us relive his experience. Interestingly, the time traveller only pauses once throughout his story to remove some flowers from his pocket. The dinner guests aren't named; this was typical of the writers at the time.

The story develops to show the time travellers curiosity of how humans develop in the far future. The pace in which the story happens is very fast; the story very quickly moves from the scene with the dinner guests to the

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year of the Morlocks and Eloi. The time traveller then comes back to tell the story to the guests and once again disappears into the far future when humans are extinct and only the most primitive form of life exists, lichen. This change in speed throughout the story keeps the reader gripped because the reader wants to know what happens on the time traveller's journey.

Fin de siècle texts were usually focused on utopia and dystopia. Utopia is described similarly to paradise; it is an ideal world with a visionary system of political and social perfection. All problems like disease, war, and hunger are non-existent. Dystopia is described as the opposite of Utopia. Dystopia is a society characterized by human misery, squalor, oppression, disease and overcrowding.

Wells had two main visions: dystopia, which is the reversal of evolution in this case. Wells visualised a world with simplicity where technology was only used for things that were needed for life. This basically was evolution reversed as the species had degenerated.

His second vision was far more extreme. To the point that there were not two different classes but they had been polarised into two completely different species. These are the Eloi and the Morlocks. The Eloi live a life of simplicity and ease, they have everything they need, such as food, clothes etc. supplied for them by the Morlocks. The Morlocks who live underground work hard to sustain the luxurious life's of the Eloi.

The Eloi are the first species that the time traveller comes across. Their name 'Eloi' is quite similar to the word elite, which describes them best.

The Eloi represent the upper class of Wells time. However, instead of evolving they have degenerated and have become completely reliant on the lower class (the Morlocks) for life's prerequisites. They are physically and mentally weak.

The Eloi are described as having a small, fragile, pretty childlike appearance using words and phrases: 'pretty little creatures', 'frail' and 'a certain childlike ease'.

They are also described to have a 'Dresden china type of prettiness', which suggests that they are delicate, pretty, fragile and are all very alike in their appearance similarly to Dresden china. They are described as having 'further peculiarities' in their appearance such as: 'uniformly curly' hair, which came to a 'sharp end at the neck and cheek', their 'mouths were small, with bright red, rather thin lips', their 'little chins ran to a point' and they had 'large and mild' eyes. The time traveller realised that 'these people of the future were alike' and that there was no gender distinction. Their appearance could be due to their strict vegetarian diet as animals were extinct and their lack of muscle use.

Their behaviour is very irregular; they made no attempt to communicate with the time traveller. They are mentally unchallenged and are people of very low intelligence. They have no desire whatsoever for information and they do not question.

Their lack of interest for anything transpires when one of their own species (Weena) is left to drown in the river. They just sat around and didn't make

'the slightest attempt to rescue the weakly crying little thing'. This gives us the impression that the Eloi are an emotionless species.

The Eloi all eat and sleep together in one large community inside one building. There doesn't seem to be any families as such.

They do not appear to have a personality of their own. They all seem the same in appearance and personality. This is apparent with the unclear gender distinction; there are no old people; they speak a simple language; they don't work; and most importantly they don't question. Because they don't question everything that happens seems normal to them. Without realising it they have become "fatted cattle". There doesn't seem to be any social problems that were so obvious in Wells' time.

This lack of discrimination may explain why the Eloi were not afraid of the time traveller when they first saw him, they seemed to be somewhat bemused by him. Their only fears are the dark and the Morlocks. They seem to be scared of the Morlocks but not death.

The time traveller's response to the Eloi is one of disappointment: 'all the traditions, the complex organisations, the nations, languages, aspirations and even the mere memory of man as I know him has been swept out of existence.' He came to the future to see how 'man' had evolved, yet clearly the Eloi had degenerated as they are incapable of functioning alone.

The Morlocks are the degenerated forms of underground factory workers that worked to provide for the upper class. They represent the lower class, which at first glimpse would appear to make the class system of 802, 701 no

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different to that of 1899. Interestingly there is a twist, in Wells' time the upper class were in control but in 802, 701 the lower class have the power.

Wells' describes the Morlocks as 'queer little ape-like creatures... dull white and strange grey large greyish red eyes... flaxen hair.' In this one sentence he uses colour, imagery and visual detail to show his revulsion for the Morlocks in an emotive and vivid description; this is most very effective as it gives the reader an immediate impression of the Morlocks repulsive, nocturnal animal like appearance. Wells' effectively uses emotive adjectives to show his revulsion: 'monstrous', 'sly' and 'gruesome'. He referred them to be like a 'human spider', which suggests they have scary and repulsive appearance.

The Morlocks lived underground through a labyrinth of tunnels, constantly running machines to provide for the Eloi. The Morlocks seem to have abnormally large eyes, which suggest they have adapted to the dark and the retinas in their eyes are very sensitive to light, their vision becomes impaired. Therefore, they hunt the Eloi in the night. They are a grotesque form of species.

The time traveller's response to them is one of utter disgust. He soon finds out that they are cannibals, yet he doesn't want to believe it. The breath of the Morlocks is sickening and the time traveller feels revulsion by their 'heavy smell'.

The relationship of the Eloi and Morlocks is quite clearly a reflection of the upper and lower class relationship in Wells' time. Wells creates a sense of



horror by the time traveller's realisation that the Morlocks are cannibals, which was "unspeakable" at the time and still is to this very day.

Wells is warning us of the perils of the divisive class system. Wells sees a time when the upper class become effete similarly to the Eloi and the working class would become strong and have all the power. This power will lead to deterioration in the world, leaving it in a state of Dystopia.

This can be easily prevented though. The class system would need to be abolished and a clear state of social equality, a world with no class distinction; this can be achieved by educating the working class, giving them a civilised attitude, culture to live in and to treat them as human's not cheap labour.

Personally I think Wells is both an optimist and pessimist. He is pessimistic about his projected future views on the world, as he expects the worst to happen if there is no change. Yet, he can be said to be optimistic at times as he takes favour for a lot of his own views and believes they will work. The question is will many people accept his views; the dinner guests were not totally convinced with his theories on time travel and had quite optimistic views towards it. Then a lot of people would have thought nothing of them but now we take them for granted.

'The Time Machine' allows Wells to give his authorial viewpoint; his political theories on civilisation as a whole and how we can benefit from everyone being equal to the next person. Although, on a personal note I believe Wells' points were very valid. So it could be said to be a novel of its time as it is

very intriguing to read and gives the reader the anticipation to read on. Even though it uses quite a lot of sophisticated and scientific language, it is a book for everyone to read, as it gives people an insight into what might develop if such things were not to change. However, the society of today is not in danger of what Wells' was warning us of. But we are in trouble of destruction through our greed for power.