

The time machine: when progress becomes destructive



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In his early novel, *The Time Machine*, H. G. Wells is critiquing the Victorians' fears of evolution. Charles Darwin's theories were cutting-edge in Wells' time, and they terrified many of the upper class. What if humans devolve to the point where the class roles become reversed? What if our eventual triumph over nature results in a dulling of human intelligence? And worst of all: what if humankind becomes extinct? These and other questions plagued the Victorians, providing H. G. Wells with material for his first novel.

Victorian scientists took Darwin's theory of evolution, and created their own theory of devolution. The fear was that if evolution was possible, then humans must still be evolving. What could that mean for the future? Wells answered that question with his theory of degeneration following security. In his prediction of the future he shows us the Victorian upper class, continuing on their path of idleness, and devolving into small, weak, helpless creatures like the Eloi. "The too-perfect security of the Upper-worlders had led them to a slow movement of degeneration, and to a general dwindling in size, strength, and intelligence" (57). The lower class, after centuries of living in the dark and with an aptitude for hard work and machinery, became the nocturnal, ugly creatures represented by the Morlocks. "Even now, does not and East-end worker live in such artificial conditions as practically to be cut off from the natural surface of the earth?" (56), the Time Traveller expounds to his friends. As avid supporter of Karl Marx, Wells comes to the conclusion that if the exploitation of the Victorian lower class continued, they may eventually gain class consciousness. This in turn may cause a rebellion, and perhaps a reversal of power between the classes as the Eloi and Morlocks exhibit. However Wells takes it further: when the Morlocks' food supply runs

out, they have nothing left to eat except the Eloi themselves. This might be seen as the ultimate gesture of class rebellion: cannibalism. “ These Eloi were mere fatted cattle, which the ant-like Morlocks preserved and preyed upon – probably saw to the breeding of” (72). The shocking part is that Wells wasn’t far off from his time. The Victorian lower class exceeded the upper class substantially in numbers, and if the exploitation continued, the upper class could have faced a revolution.

The Time Traveller’s theory is that in striving for modernity and accomplishment as the British were in the 19th century, humans may actually tame nature. “ One triumph of a united humanity over Nature had followed another. Things that are now mere dreams had become projects deliberately put in hand and carried forward. And the harvest was what I saw” (35). The British, with all their advancement in technology, could have a cure for every illness, a triumph over every adversity, to the point where there was nothing left to plague them anymore. With this lack of adversity, upper class humans had begun to degenerate into the weak, stupid creatures that the Time Traveller now sees as the Eloi. “ There is no intelligence where there is no change and no need of change” (91). All of the wondrous inventions and technology of the industrial revolution, all of the effort to create the best of all possible worlds had come to nothing in the future, cast aside for the easy life of the Eloi. That the once-great thinkers of the world had become mere cattle was almost too much for the Time Traveller to bear. “ I grieved to think how brief the dream of the human intellect had been. It had committed suicide. It had set itself steadfastly towards comfort and ease... it had attained its hopes – to come to this at

last" (90). Wells argues that the push towards the taming of nature that Britain was trying to accomplish was self-defeating. Modernity, therefore, is ultimately doomed, for it can only lead to a world of " languor and decay" (37).

The biggest fear that Darwin's theories created for the Victorians was extinction. It was a logical scientific theory that humans could evolve to the point of extinction, that the earth could stop rotating, and the sun could eventually flare out. This is exactly what the Time Traveller sees as he travels farther into the future. " The sky was no longer blue. North-eastward it was inky black... and all the trace of life that I could see at first was the intensely green vegetation that covered every projecting point" (95). The only living things in this distant future appear to be giant crustaceans, some kind of black octopus, and several forms of lichen (96-9). As he travels even farther ahead, it becomes clear that humankind is extinct. " The darkness grew apace; a cold wind began to blow... the showering white flakes increased in number.... It would be hard to convey the stillness of it" (99). For the Victorians of Wells's time, it was very hard to imagine that their race, the best and most advanced in the world, would become extinct. That would mean that the world would continue to exist long after their extinction, and humanity is only a blip in eternity. All the progress they had been working towards is therefore meaningless in the long run, and all their pride is for nought.

In conclusion, Wells foreshadowed a greater idea than he thought possible at the time he wrote *The Time Machine*. If the Victorian upper class continued on the path of idleness and exploitation, they would surely find themselves

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in the future Wells envisioned. Britain, in its struggle to conquer the world, would only end up defeating itself. And in this future world, all of our greatest inventions are worthless. These and other fears of evolution were the exact fears Wells was critiquing in his first novel.

Works Cited

Wells, H. G. *The Time Machine*. New York: Signet, 2002. Print.