

TIME AND MAN IN THE TIME MACHINE: H. G. WELLS

Akanksha Johar*

ABSTRACT

In every age, there have been minds more responsive to the transparent honesty and greatness of Plato and Aristotle than to the tangled dogmatism of the fathers. Incidentally, Wells' literary work from the late Victorian Age records his transparent honesty and mind's respond to the greatness of Plato and Aristotle, and his fiction doesn't yield to the accepted social or literary traditions and manages to retain his distinctiveness even today. While building planets, spaceships and aliens out of broken crockery from his father's crockery store in the backyard of bleak Atlas house situated in Kent, England, Wells unconsciously prepared himself to deal with the path-breaking ideas that soon found forms in his prolific literary career. Wells may have started publishing fiction at a ripe age, but his tryst with fantasy started quite early in that backyard with his Dickensian childhood. Despite his humble background and his mother's attempts at training him to be a draper's apprentice, he cultivated reading and was highly influenced by Plato's Republic and Swift's Gulliver's Travels. Against odds, he studied the vaguely developed branches of the science of his time and honed his imagination alongside. His education and imagination combined with an analytical mind full of ideas brought him to a literary career spread over sixty years. He used the genre of fantasy as an escape mechanism in his growing years as a reader and continued contributing to the genre in the early years as a novelist. He grew up in the time of the Golden Age of the British Empire, after the industrial revolution, the progress of mankind was taken for granted. At a time like that Wells thought beyond that progress. He imagined a negative future when the Empire was still riding the wave of success. A believer in the natural cycle, he used his common sense and envisioned a downfall of the Empire that may have been laughable at the time. However, his message was skillfully disguised in his early fiction.

Keywords: *Tangled Dogmatism, Transparent Honesty, Imagination, Speculative, Fantasy Literature.*

Introduction

A strong-willed individual, Wells never abided by conventions of his time, nor did he doubt the reception of his radical ideas. As an escape mechanism or as a tool to represent diverse imagination, Wells didn't shy away from going against the popular wave. This way, according to J.D. Beresford, Wells freed himself very completely from the bonds of conventional thought. Wells expressed his powerful imagination and ideas in a simple journalistic style that was clear and easy to understand, unlike his Modernist contemporaries. This simplicity of language and format may have resulted out of the complexity of the ideas that he needed to convey. Majority of his speculative or fantasy literature deals with the future of the Earth and the effects of present or potential social and political action and scientific invention on the human race.

As he expanded the scope of his imagination, there came stories concerning medical science like The Island of Doctor Moreau and imagined societies of the future world, inhabitants of different planets and consequences of many a scientific experiment in the novellas like The Invisible Man, The War of the Worlds, When the Sleeper Awakes and The First Men in the Moon. One idea that stands out and finds its place in immortal fantasies is that of the time machine. In his first published novel, The Time Machine (1895), Wells tries to convey that no matter how far human race reaches in the future with the help of science and technology, the future of mankind will depend on how a man deals with other men and his own self.

* Assistant Professor, Department of English, St. Xavier's College, Jaipur, Rajasthan, India.

Meddling with time wasn't a new phenomenon towards the end of 19-century fiction. However, the base of his fantastic travel into logical, scientific reasoning was Wells' original contribution to literature as well as science. Wells had keen observation powers and was so conscious of it that he straight away applied them in his first novel while still in his 20s. As Wells' known critic J.R. Hammond puts it, He was aware of his ability to write about ordinary men and women and to depict them in extraordinary situations. This gift inviting suspension of disbelief was to prove one of his greatest strengths.

Through the medium of a fictional scientific discovery combined with mythical and allegorical elements, Wells weaves an imaginary social predicament in distant future based on his observations of the present. The Time Machine takes us from the near past to the distant future providing a glimpse of the world not just as it is today but as it once was and will be or could be. Well's resorting to the form of fantasy in The Time Machine may be mainly due to his deprived childhood and running away from the miseries of the present and finding their solutions in a fictional world. His biographers' critics Norman and Jeanne Mackenzie observe that Wells himself had an excellent eye and ear, talents which launched him first as a reporter and then as an author. The power of convincing description later enabled him to carry his readers unnoticing from fact into fantasy but his fascination with circumstances, with the sense rather than with sensibilities, was also a means of escape from depth of feeling.

The Time Machine precisely journeys from 'fact to fantasy' with Wells' imagination, literary abilities and use of logical scientific theory. His choice of time travel as the subject for his first novel involves foresight and curiosity to deal with something new and grab attention towards what he has to say about the effects of the vices of the Victorian and Edwardian society and finding possible solutions in the imaginary future. In that first phase of his literary career, he was writing to earn money. He became prolific to earn a livelihood and the success and originality of The Time Machine inspired him to take up futuristic and scientific themes for other novels too. In his words, he was giving his readers the ideas from the same tap that The Time Machine came from. The writing process with looming deadline brought the best ideas from Wells' mind at the time where he combined his interest in socialism, science and future of mankind in novels like The War of the Worlds and The Island of Dr Moreau.

As he became a known figure in the literary circles, he started expressing his own opinions through newspaper articles. His reputation as a visionary storyteller was already established. However, many of his political opinions often met with criticism. His disagreements with the Fabian Society and George Bernard Shaw came into the public eye as well. Wells satirized this incident and his enemies into his semi-autobiographical confessional novel in 1909 titled The New Machiavelli. Especially in the last phase of his literary career, his political ideologies overpowered his creativity. He had faith in socialism but he despised Marxism. He didn't show the same spark of his earlier days in his writing. This led to miffed reactions from literary circles. Even those like George Orwell who claimed to have grown up reading Wells' novels, started criticizing his political takes around the two World Wars. C. S. Lewis also caricatured Wells in his novel That Hideous Strength and poked fun at his political ideologies. The stubbornness that helped him to a steady rise as a young writer cost him many friends and his reputation at the time to a certain extent.

This was also the time when he wrote his lesser-known novels in form of psychological thrillers like Babes in the Darkling Wood and All Aboard for Ararat. His last book Mind at the End of its Tether published in 1945 expresses his earlier fear of complete eradication of mankind. By this time the world had experienced a lot of turmoil in terms of wars and his warning like message no longer captured imaginations of the readers. However, his overall literary contribution shines over the controversies of his later years. Amidst more than 50 works of fiction, The Time Machine remains to be his most celebrated work even today.

Finding Real Solutions in Fantasy

Time brings change, time heals wounds and time even flies, at least figuratively. Time is relative. It cannot be measured and yet most things can be measured in the context of time. It is one element that can encompass the past, the present, the future, the outer space and even the imaginary worlds and still be relevant. It is this idea of 'time' that Wells plays around within his novella, The Time Machine. Wells takes an important leap from old 'extraordinary voyages' and romances that were the order of the day in his time. Time travelling through a machine was the unusual means that was never used this way in English literature before Wells' Time Traveler lands in the future world. Predecessors of Wells used a variety of routes for their characters to reach the fantasy lands. Earlier, characters used to wake up in a future or a distant world, or accidentally reach a fairyland. As George Mann says, The Novel (The Time Machine) uses technology to transport its hero to and from the future – until this point authors

usually used magic or hibernator slumber to move their protagonists forward through time. Wells changed this. However, while reading *The Time Machine*, one can gather that social concerns overshadow the scientific approach in this novel and technology and science are just mediums for Wells to put across his real message. Alfred changed this. MacAdams rightly observes that the 'science' in Wells' fictions is nothing more than stage machinery. Wells doesn't waste time in in-depth scientific explanations as his story makes gradual but clear progress. On the surface, Wells tells a fantasy tale where his protagonist, ambiguously known as the Time Traveler goes through an adventurous journey. It is this journey that occupies the centre of his story where most of the other characters are named after their occupations too. A third-person narrator objectively accounts the experiments of the Time Traveler, a scientist known for his eccentricities towards the end of the 19 century. An Upper-class Victorian Scholar himself, the Time Traveler gathers his scholar friends from various fields of knowledge in his house every week where they share opinions and discuss new ideas. The narrator is a part of this group that later on bears witness to the Time Traveler recounting his adventurous journey on a Time machine.

During a dinner meet the Time Traveler introduces these scholar friends to a replica of the mechanism of a time machine, though the scholars mock him in disbelief. They schedule their next meeting after a week and when the scholars once again gather to hear the tale of the Time Traveler, he makes a late dramatic appearance and recounts his experience of spending eight days in the future. When the Time Traveler lands in an unknown future destination, out of initial curiosity, he observes the creatures of the future. Based on their appearance and behaviour he derives that out of the two different descendants of the human race, the Eloi are gentle but timid, while the Morlocks are hostile and aggressive. The Eloi seem too disinterested and passive. When Weena, an Eloi woman, is drowning in the stream, a group of Eloi keeps watching, but none of them attempts to save her. When the Time Traveler saves her, he makes his first friend in this future land, set in 802, 701 AD. The Morlocks on the other hand are the creatures who come out only at night and fear the light. They operate heavy machinery underground and take care of feeding and clothing the Eloi of the upper world. They are uncouth and monster-like in appearance and when they get the chance, they steal the time machine. Whether they wish to lure the Time Traveler by holding his machine hostage, they wish to capture him to understand the machine better or they simply wish to kill him is not clear at first. Neither the Time Traveler nor Wells attempt to ponder over the trigger behind this stealth. As the Time Traveler is fraternizing with the Eloi and possesses powers of fire-making in form of matchsticks, he is a threat to the Morlocks. These creatures of darkness fear any form of light. As their only activity, apart from devouring Eloi is to operate machinery, it can be a possibility that they simply wished to study the machine.

However, once they try to rip the Traveler apart in the forest fire their intentions become clear. They hide the time machine inside the structure of the White Sphinx. This forces the Time Traveler to stay in this future world against his will until he manages to get it back. His efforts to save himself from getting trapped into the future allow him to explore more of this world. However, the more he understands this world, the more disappointed he becomes. He establishes a threadbare rapport with the Eloi and makes several attempts of thwarting the Morlocks. The Time Traveler in fighting the Morlocks uses fire, but accidentally a forest fire erupts. As a result, he mysteriously loses his friend Weena, who is either captured by the Morlocks or perishes in the fire. Eventually, he finds his time machine back by tricking the Morlocks and feels relieved in leaving that particular phase in the future. From the world of the Eloi and the Morlocks, he travels even farther into the future and reaches a time 30 million years from now, where the Earth is about to be swallowed by the Sun which is also on the verge of extinction. Finally, He comes back from the end of time, and after sharing his experiences with his peers, he takes off to another endless journey the next day. This constant employment of the idea of travelling in time offers Wells a larger canvas to span a journey for his protagonist and plant roots for an array of meaningful symbols. This journey through time is the catalyst here that unfolds Wells' imagination.

Once the Traveler is in this future land, his quest becomes more Arthurian in nature. There are further medieval allegorical elements as the Sphinx, the decaying palaces and gardens that are central to the symbolism of the story. According to Patrick Parrinder, the Sphinx is the symbol of foreboding and prophecy. A sculpture of the Sphinx is the first thing that Time Travel notices the moment he lands in this future world. In the latter part, he notices the palaces and the gardens that suggest the landscape of neoclassical paintings and country houses while alluding to a line of English time of arrival or loss of the machine or discovery of the old knowledge at the world of the mind. Utopian romances which would have been fresh in the mind of Wells. However, Wells uses these old symbols in a completely different setting and circumstances. The Morlocks hide the time machine inside the very sculpture of Sphinx and Wells has to make his way inside that structure. Be it at the ruins, the sculpture of Sphinx is constantly present and visible in the important scenes in this future world, representing the riddle of mankind.

The implied riddle leads one to think of Oedipus. Like Oedipus, the Traveler has to find answers to human identity in this strange setting. He is also obsessed with solving the puzzle of 'time'. His encounter with the mythical Sphinx and his constant readiness to derive meaning out of observation makes his quest resemble that of Oedipus. Bradley W. Buchanan looks for reasons behind Wells' inspiration. He thinks that the strongest clue to why Wells makes his Traveler bear a strong likeness to Oedipus is because Oedipus represents both the human effort to reinvent itself anew with each succeeding generation and the inevitable destruction that comes as a part of the consequences of the efforts.

The Traveler's effort to survive in the strange land leads his quest into the second stage where according to Campbell's theory of 'Initiation', the hero deals with various risky and dangerous adventures during the journey. While preparing himself for this journey, the Time Traveler had cheerfully accepted it as an unavoidable risk – one of the risks a man has got to take. Once he reaches the future land, his adventures seem endless. He begins with observing the little, tame looking Eloi and concludes that communism has been successful and the world is boringly peaceful. This indicates that the Time Traveler has inherited Wells' thought process.

However, very soon he discovers the existence of the Morlocks, the hostile underworld people as he tries to find his time machine. The loss of his time machine poses a great challenge as it could have resulted in his getting the consequences of the efforts permanently trapped in this future land. He finally rediscovers his machine and fights the Morlocks and after a warlike struggle, manages to escape from there. At this point of time, the machine becomes the Traveler's damsel in distress that needs to be saved from the clutches of dragon-like Morlocks. At first, the Morlocks try to lure him by showing him the glimpse of his own stolen machine. The Morlocks had even cleaned and oiled the machine. This particular action is further indicative of the fact that Wells intended them to have descended from the working class. The minute the Traveler moves closer to the machine, the Morlocks close ranks on him. However, this time once the Traveler climbs his time machine, he evaporates in thin air before they can grab hold of him. His scientifically explained time machine gives him a power that produces supernatural effects.

His curiosity about this strange future gets satiated but he is disappointed with the degeneration of mankind. He tries to reason what caused this great divide into these two descendants of the human race. On one occasion, when he climbs down a well in search of his machine, a portal to enter the underworld of the Morlocks, he encounters utter darkness. On lighting a match, outlines of giant machines emerge in front of him. This evokes references to the industrial revolution and the rise of the machines in his time and association of the lower class with the operation of the machinery. In his time, the upper class controlled the lower ones. Yet through this long stretch of time, the control has shifted towards the one that holds the machine. The class discrimination through ages seems to be the apparent logical cause behind the effects that he sees in future. He remains in the same area, but the leap in the time frame and his journey through time turns into an adventure.

The 'Return' or the final stage as per Campbell's theory marks the return of the hero as he comes home with knowledge and powers that he acquires through the journey after experiencing a near-death experience or considerable amount of pain. Time Traveler escapes his death at the hands of the Morlocks and vanishes out of 802,701 AD only to go a little further in time. The Time Traveler takes human existence as an interestingly plotted mystery novel and wishes to read the last chapter eagerly. He reaches the end of time. This particular part of the novel is pure narrative as the Traveler observes the changes on the Earth sans mankind and the only action that takes place is in the form of his progress through time. He witnesses that forms of life are meeting extinction on the Earth. What is left in form of giant crabs is not even remotely in resemblance with the Homo sapiens.

According to Carlos Parada, 'Time' becomes tangible as The concept of addressing Time as the Fourth Dimension is a pseudo-mythical expression that attempts to make Time more visible. Wells talks about the fourth dimension in *The Time Machine* by saying, There is no difference between Time and any of the three dimensions of Space except that our consciousness moves along it...Time is only a kind of Space. Because of this approach, *The Time Machine* has become the first work to reach closest to the scientific approach in describing the time travelling and making of a time machine. Space-time continuum has gone through a lot of scrutinizes after Wells' presentation of it in 1895. It has finally found scientific authentication in Einstein's theory of relativity.

In Wells' time, people were still coming to terms with the concept of fixed 'time'. It was only in 1884, ten years before the publication of Wells' novel, that 'time' was standardized throughout the world and international time zones based on the Greenwich Meridian were established. Wells skillfully located the home of the Time traveller at Richmond, just a few miles away from Greenwich. The Traveler lived

very close to the centre of time. Greenwich Mean Time was the standard by which time was measured throughout the Earth then. Thus, the Traveler embarking on a journey through time from this location is also symbolically near the focal length of the time dimension. The Traveler constantly describes various times of the day in the future world and keeps the concept of 'time' in the foreground for the readers well. Another aptly fictionalized scientific theme is the subject of Evolution. This particular scientific theory affected Wells' vision of the future divide in human species. According to George Mann, Wells studied Evolution under T. H. Huxley, a great supporter of Darwin, and this obviously played a part in Wells' vision of his future, in which he saw the human race dividing into two independent subspecies over a vast period of time.

Wells' protagonist observes in the future that the Natural Selection has divided the human species into two distinct races, the Eloi and the Morlocks as Time Traveler observes that man has not remained one species, but has differentiated into two distinct animals: that the graceful children of the Upper- world were not the sole descendants of his generation, but that the bleached, obscene, nocturnal thing, which had flashed before him, was also heir to all the ages. The Eloi at first appear to revel in a utopian society, while the Morlocks dwell in an underground dystopia. The Eloi are gentle but naïve and docile. When the Time Traveler returns to the sanctuary of Eloi from the fight with the Morlocks in the forest where Weena dies in the struggle, he is disheartened and angry. The Eloi are engaged in their usual playing, singing and revelling in the sunlight. The sight of disturbed, battle-worn Traveler and absence of Weena means nothing to them. This isn't mere detachment but complete lack of interest and human emotions. Morlocks on the other hand are brutal but intelligent and successful in what they are doing. It is Morlocks who have captured the imagination of the readers through the generation, inspiring metal or gothic musical bands to visual artists with their beastly appearance and brutality.

The common man is their ancestor. They show the curiosity in the time machine, they even try and capture the Traveler and brutally massacre the Eloi. Their negative appearance is the degeneration of their lost spirit and loss of contact with the Sunlight. The underground civilization of Morlocks fascinated Wells to such an extent that he recreated another race living on the Moon called 'Selenites' in the subsequent novel *The First Men on The Moon*, who live underground. But unlike the Morlocks, they are highly advanced. As Darwin's theory being new and a subject of deep interest for students of biology in Wells' time, he uses the evolutionary theory to his contemporary humanity and the plight of Eloi and Morlocks. Victorian England, a post-industrial revolution was facing a social upheaval. The class division was an integral part of the society, Wells the visionary tries to show the Victorians that if they continued in the same manner, the future will be as grim as lives of Morlocks and Eloi.

Conclusion

Nevertheless, it is Wells' heroic portrayal of the Time Traveler's character that makes the readers sympathise with him in his endeavours. The Scholars' mockery ignites the challenge in the Time Traveler as he becomes more determined in making his experiment real. However, once the Traveler is back from the future, he is not interested in their reaction. He doesn't care if this intellectual group does not believe in his invention and narration of experiences, he is happy to have shared it and visited the future. The Scholars represent that larger part of the scholarly world that block ways for the limited few who are ready to break free from boundaries and discover more of the world and beyond.

Wells creates these stereo-type hurdles in the path of the Time Traveler, reflecting the difficulties that everyone has to face in society. When his Traveler reaches the far end of the time on the Earth, Wells depicts that no intelligent life will be able to survive in such circumstances. The only natural mechanism can last in form of giant butterflies and crabs over a dead planet. These Giant butterflies and spiders serve as allegorical symbols for Wells. His imagination of the last days of the Earth paints a vivid picture in front of one's eyes and issue a warning at the same time as the Time Traveler watches the final, dying moments, of the Earth before the Sun expands to swallow the planet. Wells is not optimistic about the future, and in *The Time Machine*, he attempts to show his Victorian readers one possible means by which they might eventually bring their downfall.

Wells' imagination of the future turns out to be unlike the fairyland or adventurous enchantment or political allegories of his predecessors. However, it doesn't fail to evoke the sense of wonder that is always associated with a work of fantasy or the early speculative tales. Even after more than a century, the time machine has remained an awe-inspiring object, the novel is full of sense of wonder. The awe-inspiring sequences are many, be it the curious narrator's confusion overseeing his senior scientist friend disappearing on the technical body that he calls the time machine, or the thrill of being trapped inside a time that seems dead calm after the final catastrophe, leaving a cliff hanger curiosity.

Curiosity and wonder merge in *The Time Machine*. After coming back from the future, the next day, the Traveler leaves for an eternal journey, never to come back in this time. Igniting a sense of wonder about what has happened to him in future or past, in whichever way in time he has travelled. *The Time Machine* succeeds as a science fantasy novel as it weaves scientific theories space-time continuum and evolution with social observations and literary imagination and conveys a thoughtful futuristic message. As J. R. Hammond notes, That Wells intended an allegorical interpretation to exist beneath the surface narrative is apparent from the extensive use of mythology and dream imagery... *The Time Machine* is a voyage not only into the future but also into the unconscious. By dramatizing fundamental aspirations and fears in the form of an allegorical fable, Wells created a myth of continuing relevance to our time.

The Time Machine came at the tail-end of Victorian literature, just before the Modernism sprouted and settled on the literary scene. Its narrative is subjective rather than omniscient, like a Jane Austen novel (where the narrator seems to know everyone's life story and thought process). The Time Traveler is something like a detective trying to connect the dots over some millenniums in futurity without with the aid of his machine. With all the mythological and metaphorical interpretations, in the world of *The Time Machine*, the Time Traveler is simply a scientific man with knowledge but no extra powers that characters of fantasy are expected to possess. However, he is the hero of a fantasy who possesses the qualities of an insatiable urge to find an answer and invents the means to continue his search. He follows through with his experiment to its logical conclusion and speeds forward into the mind-meltingly distant future and the sunset of mankind, in a sequence that is close to the psychedelic epilogue of *2001: A Space Odyssey*. He indeed becomes the literary ancestor of Clarke's Bowman, as he hovers over the future of mankind. *The Time Machine* proves to be a product of a socially troubled mind grappling in the sphere of ideas and fantasy, seeking possible answers to its author's questions. The novel evidently secures Wells a place in human history as his spirit of curiosity lingers on the generation of writers to come.

References

- Mackenzie, Norman, Jeanne Mackenzie, "Early Adolescence", H.G. Wells - A Biography, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973), p.178.
- Beresford, J.D., H.G. Wells: A Critical Study, (Rockville: Wildside Press LLC, 2005), p.16.
- Hammond, John R., H.G. Wells's *The Time Machine: A Reference Guide*, (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2004), p.9.
- Mackenzie, Norman, Jeanne Mackenzie, "The Burden of Atlas House", H. G. Wells - A Biography, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973), p.28.
- Mann, George, *The Mammoth Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, (London: Robinson, 2001), p.313.
- MacAdam, Alfred, H.G. Wells, "Introduction", *The Time Machine and the Invisible Man*, (New York: Spark Educational Publishing, 2003), p.xv.
- Parrinder, Patrick, "Possibility of Space and Time", *Shadows of the Future: H. G. Wells, Science Fiction, and Prophecy*, (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1995), p.42.
- Buchanan, Bradley W., "Oedipus before Freud: Humanism and Myth in H. G. Wells' *The Time Machine*", *Oedipus against Freud: Myth and the End(s) of Humanism in Twentieth-Century*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), pp.3-20.
- Wells, H. G., *The Time Machine*, (New York: TOR, 1992), p.25.
- Parada, Carlos, "Chronos", <<http://www.maicar.com/GML/Chronos.html>>.
- Wells, H. G., *The Time Machine*, (New York: TOR, 1992), p.4.
- Hammond, John R., "Narrative Art", H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine: A Reference Guide*, (Westport: Greenwood Publishing, 2004). p.106
- Mann, George, *The Mammoth Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, (London: Robinson, 2001), p.313.
- Wells, H. G., *The Time Machine*, (New York: TOR, 1992), pp.59-60.
- Hammond, J. R., "The Time Machine as a First Novel - Myth and Allegory in Wells's Romance", H. G. Wells *Perennial Time Machine: Selected Essays*, ed. George Edgar Slusser, Patrick Parrinder, Danièle Chatelain, (Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2001), p.6.
- Wells, H. G., *The Time Machine*, (New York: TOR, 1992), p.38.

