

## **Narrative point of view and symbolic implications in the Time machine**

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As the ship of Theseus of human civilization has been sailing into the future, could human after countless and piecemeal steps of changes, both evolutionary and regressive, still be called human? The Time Machine is a novella written by British writer Herbert George Wells in 1895, when with the British Industrial Revolution in full swing, the unprecedented social development and the accelerated imperial colonial expansion led to the exposure of various social ills under the reign of Queen Victoria. This essay attempts to analyze Wells's consideration on the prospect of the British Empire in the novel from two aspects—narrative point of view and symbolic implication.

Firstly, the narrative point of view of the novel is divided into horizontal and vertical lines, complex and unique. Horizontally, there is not only one narrator, which is reflected in the novel from the narration by “I” in Chapter 1 to the self-narration by the Time Traveler in Chapter 3, in which is also interspersed with a few of my responses, and finally returning to my perspective in Chapter 12. Vertically, four significant moments are worth mentioning in the novel: last Thursday, this Thursday, the year 802701 AD and more than 30 million years later. However, instead of being narrated monotonously in chronological order, the story that happened between the latter two time points is embedded in the first two, so that the readers' thoughts at the very start will recall the last Thursday with the narration of “I”, then return to the home of the Time Traveler at present and start the eight-day adventure with the new narrator in reverse order.

Therefore, the narrative point of view shuttles horizontally and vertically between

different times and characters. On the one hand, the past, present and future are interwoven in a way that dramatically widens the boundaries of time and space in the narrative, brilliantly demonstrating the magic of science fiction with reality and fantasy interlaced. On the other hand, it also implies that with the exploration and expansion of the empire, the explorers got lost in the confusion of cultural development, as if caught in the vortex of time and space.

Secondly, various images are used frequently to imply Wells's concerns about the future expansion of British imperialism and colonialism through the art of symbolism. The first image is the characters of Morlocks and Eloi. The Victorian period in which Wells lived was already an era of serious inequality of class and wealth. The Time Traveler said:

At first, proceeding from the problems of our own age, it seemed clear as daylight to me that the gradual widening of the present merely temporary and social difference between the Capitalist and the Labourer, was the key to the whole position (Wells 54).

The author satirizes the class contradiction in real society through the two tribes of human beings in the future world. With severe oppression and slavery, the lower class of "below ground" constantly struggled for survival, accumulating the strength of resistance, while the upper class of "above ground", who were fattened by the hard work of the working class, appeared to be bright and attractive but in fact with a tattered core, which serves as a warning that the ruling class's endless demand and plunder of colonies will eventually come back to themselves (Wells 55).

At the same time, the rise of Darwin's theory of evolution in the 19th century promoted the heated discussion of Social Darwinism and anti-utopia, arousing people's doubts and fears about the possible decline and demise of human society after its prosperous heyday. As one of them, Wells was deeply influenced by his teacher, the famous English biologist Thomas Henry Huxley, who utilized a parabola to describe it in his article "The Struggle for Existence in Human Society".

For Huxley the course of life upon the surface of the earth was like the trajectory of "a ball fired from a mortar," and "the sinking half of that

course is as much a part of the general process of evolution as the rising (Hillegas 20).

Intuitively, when human civilization reaches the apex of the parabola, it is possible that human energy, passion and creativity will gradually deteriorate, accompanied by the decline of morality, the lack of conscience, the collapse of social structure and the loss of the existing achievements of civilization. As Wells wrote, “Strength is the outcome of need; security sets a premium on feebleness” (34).

The second one is the existence of numerous eastern elements. With the intensification of British colonial expansion, the cultures of the East and the West collided violently, but surprisingly, the native cultures of the colonies also infiltrated Britain reversely and invisibly, which was confirmed by the phenomenon that English absorbed a large number of colonial languages such as Indian and African languages, triggering the panic of British people on the trend of social regression and assimilation. In the story, the first thing the Time Traveler saw after arriving in the future world was the “White Sphinx”, a symbol of Egypt (Wells 24). Furthermore, what was extremely frightening was that after his exploration, he was convinced that his position, his own home in Britain, did not change, which meant that Eastern culture would profoundly penetrate into the British Empire in the future.

The third one is the suggestion of the decline of the British Empire. The dilapidated museum in the book was located in “the ruins of some latter-day South Kensington”, a famous affluent area of London in Victorian times, where there was a largest museum of science and technology in Western Europe, with the display of various technological achievements of the Industrial Revolution and the curiosities collected from colonies around the world, which was a powerful reminder of the annihilation of the spiritual essence of British civilization (Wells 73). Another strong evidence is the recurring occurrence of sunsets. For instance, in Chapter 4 he said, “The ruddy sunset set me thinking of the sunset of mankind” and in Chapter 11, the sun had even “disappeared” and only “rose and fell in the west” (Wells 34-92). As known to us all, England is also acknowledged as “the empire on which the sun never sets”, but the sun in the story finally set there and never rose again, obviously and self-evidently indicating the

author's deep apprehension about the decay of the British Empire.

Pessimism about the future development of society is a common theme in Wells's science fiction, but his purpose is not to lament the future but to warn the present, hence he leaves the seeds of hope, that is, the fourth image—two white flowers brought back from more than 800,000 years later, which was placed in the pocket of the Time Traveler by an Eloi, Weena, witnessing their glorious time in mutual company. The last line of the novel:

And I have by me, for my comfort, two strange white flowers—  
shriveled now, and brown and flat and brittle—to witness that even  
when mind and strength had gone, gratitude and a mutual tenderness  
lived on in the heart of Man (Wells 105).

The course of human society depends on whether the current rulers are wary of class conflicts and whether the people remain in awe of technological invasion. Then perhaps human emotions beyond time, space, language and culture will still exist after countless vicissitudes of evolution and regression.

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