

An Analysis of “The Time Machine” by H.G. Wells

Introduction

“The Time Machine” is a novel by H.G. Wells published in 1895. The story follows a character, simply named “the Time Traveller,” who invents a time machine and uses it to travel to the future. There he finds two new races of human beings, the Eloi and the Morlocks. The Time Traveller discovers that mankind is long past its intellectual peak, having degenerated into simple beings that live in a harmless environment and rely on their technology to meet their needs. Though the future is not as utopic as it seems: the Morlocks are found to have resorted to cannibalism as their main food source. He narrowly escapes the future, returning to his time to tell his colleagues what he has seen. The novel is an adaptation of an earlier work of his, “The Chronic Argonauts,” which explores similar themes in the time travel subgenre. “The Time Machine” was particularly successful upon its release, paving the way for a slew of time-travel-inspired novels and significantly influenced the science fiction genre as a whole.

Plot Synopsis

The story opens with the protagonist, aptly named “the Time Traveller”, sitting by a fire with a group of professionals from various field, none of which are named but referred to by their profession or a physical description (e.g., “the Psychologist,” or “the Very Young Man”), with the exception of one character named Filby. The Time Traveller introduces to them his conception of time travel, stating that time is merely a fourth dimension, just like that of the usual three spatial dimensions. He then brings in a small prototype of his time-traveling device and demonstrates it by pulling one of its levers, causing it to vanish into thin air. His audience is perplexed but remains skeptical.

A few days later the narrator returns to the house of the Time Traveller for dinner, which is also attended by a new group of nameless individuals. The Time Traveller is late to his own dinner, looked raggedy and acting distant. He cleans himself up and gorges himself before saying a word. After dinner he finally explains to his guests the reason for his state. He recounts the following tale.

That morning he was able to perform the first test of his time machine, which threw him far into the future, putting him in the year 802,701 CE. Luckily, he materializes in an empty space and beside him rises a white sphinx. He is initially met with an evolved species of mankind called the Eloi, who appear to be simple, docile creatures who consume a fruit-based diet and spend most of their time aimlessly interacting with each other. The Time Traveller is disappointed to see how mankind has degenerated during the intervening years. He explores his new surroundings and finds that Earth has become a large garden, with a few tall and futuristic buildings spread about which serve as the residence of the Eloi. As night falls, he returns to his

time machine, only to find that it has been taken. This sends him into a frenzy as he realizes that he is trapped in this time. Eventually he becomes exhausted looking for it and falls asleep.

The following day, after having calmed himself, he sets out once again to determine where his machine has gone. He discovers a number of shafts which appear to be venting air from deep underground, which he believes have some connection to a number of towers that are spread across the landscape. He concludes that something had moved his time machine into the white sphinx that was located next to where he materialized. He later happens upon another descendant species of mankind called the Morlocks, which are pale with large eyes and appear to walk on all-fours. He resolves to venture after this creature down into one of the aforementioned shafts.

His descent into this abyss is characterized as hellish. Startlingly, he finds a whole civilization of these Morlocks living in the darkness, appearing to feast on a kind of red meat. Despite the sheer number of Morlock he encounters, he is able to fend them off with some matches he had on his person and escapes to the surface. He concludes that as mankind eradicated many of the struggles posed by life, there became an increasing divide between the upper-class elite and the working class. The upper class slowly devolved into the Eloi and lived above ground, while the lower-class was confined to the darkness below. Eventually food ran out among the lower-class and thus they resorted to cannibalism, eating the Eloi for food. He also suspects that it is the Morlocks that took his time machine. With this realization, the Time Traveller is keen to leave, returning to the white sphinx to find it open. He willingly walks in, confident that he can fend off the Morlocks with the few remaining matches he had and escape on this time machine. He finds it, aware of the Morlock slowly closing in on him in the darkness. He reaches for his matches but realizes that they can't be lit without the box, which he had lost. Suddenly the Morlocks are on him as he struggles to get the time machine ready to leave. He nearly loses one of the levers in the darkness that is needed to start the machine, but with luck he is able to escape, hurtling through time while just barely holding on.

Finally, he is back in the present day and the rest of the story picks up with him entering for dinner. The dinner guests leave, believing the whole story is a lie. The narrator returns the following day and probes the Time Traveller, attempting to ascertain the validity of his tale. The Time Traveller promises to prove to the narrator that it isn't a hoax and disappears into his laboratory. The narrator waits for his return but grows impatient. He enters the laboratory to find the time machine gone. The story closes with the narrator never finding out what happened to the Time Traveller on that final voyage.

Implementation of Time Travel

There are actually two devices which perform the act of time traveling in the book, though both are of the same design. The first introduced is a model, only appearing in one scene

at the beginning of the book and upon being activated is quickly lost to time and space. The Time Traveller uses it as a demonstration for his peers to help illustrate his conception of time travel, hoping that it will convince them of his schemes; he remarks that it took two years to make, and he didn't go to all the work just to be called a quack.¹ In the story it is described as having a "glittering metallic framework, scarcely larger than a small clock, and very delicately made. There was ivory in it, and some transparent crystalline substance."² The model is explicitly built to look exactly like the larger machine, even having a miniature saddle for a small time traveler to sit on. Its operation is entirely done through two levers; activating one sends it into the future, and activating the other sends it into the past. The narrator describes the model's operation: "There was a breath of wind, and the lamp flame jumped. One of the candles on the mantel was blown out, and the little machine suddenly swung round, became indistinct, was seen as a ghost for a second perhaps, as an eddy of faintly glittering brass and ivory; and it was gone—vanished! Save for lamp the table was bare."³

The real machine is introduced in the same scene, being just like the model but larger. The narrator describes it as "Parts were of nickel, parts of ivory, parts had certainly been filed or sawn out of rock crystal. The thing was generally complete, but the twisted crystalline bars lay unfinished upon the bench beside some sheets of drawings, and I took one up for a better look at it. Quartz it seemed to be."⁴ Wells is keen on making it apparent that quartz and crystals are involved in the construction of the time machine. The exact reason for this is unclear, though it could stem from the archaic notion that gemstones have mystical or religious importance.⁵ The use of crystals in science fiction appears in later works, most notably in *Star Trek* with the fictitious material dilithium, which is described as "... a very hard, crystalline mineral that looks like quartz crystals—simply because quartz was what was used as a prop in the TV series."⁶

The experience of time traveling detailed in the book is likened to fast-forwarding through time, watching the sun rise and fall in quick succession and speeding up until it is merely a blur. The exact description given in the book is riveting.

I am afraid I cannot convey the peculiar sensations of time travelling. They are excessively unpleasant. There is a feeling exactly like that one has upon a switchback—of a helpless headlong motion! I felt the same horrible anticipation, too, of an imminent smash. As I put on pace, night followed day like the

¹ H. G. Wells, *The Time Machine*, 1st TOR ed (T. Doherty Associates, 1992), 8.

² Wells, "The Time Machine", 7.

³ Wells, "The Time Machine", 9.

⁴ Wells, "The Time Machine", 12.

⁵ Bonnie G. McEwan, Michael W. Davidson, and Jeffrey M. Mitchem, "A Quartz Crystal Cross from Mission San Luis, Florida," *Journal of Archaeological Science* 24, no. 6 (June 1, 1997): 529–36, <https://doi.org/10.1006/jasc.1996.0136>.

⁶ Juliane Ober and Thomas Krebs, "Chemical Elements in Fantasy and Science Fiction," *Journal of Chemical Education* 86, no. 10 (October 10, 2009), <http://www.jce.divched.org/>.

flapping of a black wing ... The twinkling succession of darkness and light was excessively painful to the eye. Then, in the intermittent darkness, I saw the moon spinning swiftly through her quarters from new to full, and had a faint glimpse of the circling stars. Presently, as I went on, still gaining velocity, the palpitation of night and day merged into one continuous greyness; the sky took on a wonderful deepness of blue, a splendid luminous color like that of early twilight; the jerking sun became a streak of fire, a brilliant arch, in space; the moon a fainter fluctuating band; and I could see nothing of the stars, save now and then a brighter circle flickering in the blue.⁷

In his work “Time Travel: The Popular Philosophy of Narrative,” David Wittenberg states, “... the time machine has become a prototype of cinematic infrastructure, still in service of an ‘empirical verification’ of evolutionary history, but now far surpassing that original goal in its ability to depict time itself, and the literal perspectives from which we might view it.”⁸ This remark points out the importance of being able to see the world changing as the Time Traveller makes his transit to the future. Not only is it “proof” that the world is in fact evolving and elapsing around the protagonist, but it also provides a grounded point of view from which the act of time travelling can be imagined and understood.

Some consideration is given to where the machine exists physically during its transit. The novel reasons that the incredible velocity of the Time Machine allows it to “slip” between the atoms of the space it occupies, hence why no collisions occur. The Time Traveller states that he realized that there was no telling where he would materialize and if there would be anything obstructing him, simply stating that it was a risk he had to accept. When he does materialize, it makes the sound of thunder, presumably due to shoving all the air particles out of the way as it solidifies.

The novel never goes into detail as to what the machine is doing that allows it to travel through time, other than merely stating that moving through time is just as simple as moving through space, you just need the right kind of force. Just like how gravity holds us to the Earth, there is a force that propels us at a specific rate through time, and time traveling is simply going against this force. This spatial description of time is striking, as this comes from before Einstein’s theory of relativity and the shift in thinking towards including time as an orthogonal dimension. At the time of publication, Newton’s conception of time, commonly known as “absolute time,” dominated both physics and popular belief. In his work “*Philosophiæ Naturalis Principia Mathematica*,” Newton states, “Absolute, true and mathematical time, of itself, and

⁷ Wells, “The Time Machine”, 22-23.

⁸ Wittenberg, David, *Time Travel: The Popular Philosophy of Narrative*, First Edition (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 89.

from its own nature flows equably without regard to anything external, ...”⁹ This definition is in part mystifying. Wells’ conception given in the book likely stems from a more tangible sense of time, simply having a past, present and future, all adjacent and, from the perspective of Wells’ Time Traveler, easily accessible.

Paradoxes and Plot Considerations

The first issue that needs to be addressed here is whether the epic has any validity to begin with. The entirety of the story is framed as the Time Traveller telling his companions his otherworldly experience, recounting the wild tale that constitutes the majority of the novel. There is some evidence presented in favor of the Time Traveller: the model time machine demonstration; an unknown species of flowers that he presents, allegedly from the future; his ragged and injured stat, having a wound that has already had a few days to heal; some damage done to the Time Machine; and finally the disappearance of both the Time Machine and the Time Traveller at the end of the story. Though convincing, the novel is designed to cast doubt on the Time Traveller and make his journey appear as some fanciful notion conceived in his laboratory. In truth it doesn’t matter much at all whether the story is true or not for this analysis. The Time Traveller’s story still presents an interesting take on the time travel plot device.

What’s interesting about “The Time Machine” is that it raises very few concerns in terms of paradoxical logic. There are two factors that play into this, the first being that the act of time traveling presented in the book has an arguably minute impact on the events of the rest of the world at either time, and the second being that the Time Traveller only ever makes two journeys that we know of. In regard to the first, the process of time traveling presented in the book has no impact on the intervening moments between the source and the destination. As the novel puts it, “The peculiar risk lay in the possibility of my finding some substance in the space which I, or the machine, occupied. So long as I travelled at a high velocity through time, this scarcely mattered; I was, so to speak, attenuated—was slipping like a vapour through the interstices of intervening substances!”¹⁰ Thus the only impact made is by the Time Traveller interacting with his surroundings in which every time he reaches. In the future he spends a very short time with the Eloi and Morlocks, during which he acts more as an observer. Though we aren’t presented with the events of the future after his visit, it is reasonable to assume that little impact has been made on the natural course of events. When he returns to tell his story, his colleagues largely pass it off as a hoax and are quick to dismiss him. The narrator is the only character seen to follow up with him, but the novel closes with even the narrator returning to their normal life and the Time Traveller a mere figment of his past. This is a sharp contrast from works like the short story “A Sound of Thunder” by Ray Bradbury, where even the most minute changes, such as stepping on

⁹ Isaac Newton, *Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica*, 1687.

¹⁰ Wells, “The Time Machine,” 24.

a butterfly, can profoundly change the future.¹¹ “The Time Machine” appeals to another conception of time travel, where time has an apparent inertia. Even if the protagonist influences events, the rest of history will carry on, being driven by larger forces that damp out these slight perturbations in time. In short, the Time Traveller bleakly passes through reality having little to no apparent effect in any time on the outcome of events.

What further restricts this analysis is how little information is presented. Not only does the Time Traveller have a minor effect on events, but we rarely ever see what he causes to happen or how things should have been. The exact nature of time can’t be deduced from its portrayal in the story and the mysterious disappearance of the Time Traveller at the end leaves the story cryptic and open-ended.

Conclusion

H.G. Wells’ “The Time Machine” is one of the earliest works of time travel literature that explores the use of a machine as a mechanism for moving through time. Its style is highly reminiscent of Victorian England, which puts a unique spin on the notion of temporal transit. Though perhaps inspired by “The Clock that Went Backward” by Edward Mitchell, “The Time Machine” was a particularly influential book that made great strides in popularizing this subgenre within the science fiction community. Its lack of consideration for paradoxes and the nuances of this style can be attributed to the infancy of time travel narratives, and thus “The Time Machine” can be seen as a steppingstone on the path to the elaborate paradigms and philosophical musings of later works on similar content.

¹¹ Ray Bradbury, “A Sound of Thunder” (New York: Doubleday, 1952).

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