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Class Conflicts and Darwinian Evolution

In this paper, I examine how H.G. Wells combines nineteenth-century ideas about class conflict with Darwinian evolution in his novel *The Time Machine*. In many apocalyptic novels, we can see traces of movements and events in society that occurred during the time period it was written in being reflected in the plot. If we look at the separation of the two different species, the Elois and the Morlocks, that exist in *The Time Machine*, by H.G. Wells, we will see the correlation between the separation of classes and evolution, which is important because it is a critique of the separation of classes during the industrial revolution in Great Britain.

The apocalypse in *The Time Machine* is secular in nature, suggesting an evolutionary apocalypse in which mankind evolves into distinct species due to the living and working conditions of society. The novel suggests an underlying order that exists, where each species plays its own role in the world and coexist. It is a scary and disturbing apocalypse, yet oddly comforting. It is comforting in the fact that evolution takes a long time, so the apocalypse will happen slowly and not all at once. We will not live to see this apocalypse happen in an instance.

In *The Time Machine,* there are two species that exist in the world: the Elois and the Morlocks. These species came to be through evolution. H.G. Wells wrote, “The two species that had resulted from the evolution of man were sliding down towards, or had already arrived at, an altogether new relationship” (Wells 46). The time period this novel was written in, the industrial revolution, had influenced Wells in his vision of the apocalypse. He saw the apocalypse being the result of the evolution of the upper and lower classes. Wells envisions the end of our world as severely separated classes evolving into completely different species. This reveals that man is neither a product of just nature or nurture, but perhaps a combination of both.

Nature versus in nurture is a debate regarding how people are who they are. The nature aspect believes that people develop based on their genetics; man is simply predisposed to be a certain way. According to a child development textbook, “these genetic, inherited influences are at work as we move from the one-cell organism that is created at the moment of contraception to the billions of cells that make up a fully formed human” (Feldman 12). Nature continues to influence us and our development as humans from the beginning.

On the other hand, nurture is the belief that a person’s development is influenced by the environment they are surrounded by. These influences can come in a variety of types. They can be biological, for example if a mother is not healthy during her pregnancy or the food she feeds her children. The influences can also be social or linked to society, such as how parents discipline their child or a family’s socioeconomic status (Feldman 12). However, many people believe that it is neither nature nor nurture that explains why we are who we are. Instead, it is a combination of the two: our genetic disposition and influences from environment factors.

The main character of the novel is a time traveler. He builds a time machine and travels to the future, where he encounters our world thousands of years from then, where mankind has evolved into the two species. The Time Traveler returns at the end of the novel and tells every one about what he witnessed. Throughout the novel, he frequently has impressions and assumptions about the futuristic world he visits, but is eventually disproved and what he originally though was incorrect. This notion symbolizes the message that Wells also may be trying to convey to readers: that everything is not what it may seem to be. This almost serves as a warning that how we live our lives today can inadvertently affect our species far into the future. This novel suggests a developmental influence from nature and nurture. Our environment, nurture, could impact our genes, nature, and result in the evolution of mankind.

*The Time Machine* was written towards the end of the industrial revolution era. During the industrial revolution in Great Britain, there was a large transition over to machinery and factories; there was also a severe separation of classes as more people moved into the cities for jobs. As one author stated, “When new machinery and new forms of power were developed, especially with the growth of steam power in the coalfield areas, then urban concentration rapidly occurred” (Musson 255).

Those who lived in the upper class lived wealthy, happy lives without dirty, laboring jobs. Those people who were lower cast worked hard, labor-intensive jobs in factories and mines. Working conditions during these times were very poor: they were crowded, unclean, and dangerous. One writer points out that “the period between the French Revolution and the later 1820s should be seen as one of severe repression of workers’ rights” (Crafts 624). Workers did not have the liberties or privileges of safe working environments. Their civil rights were suppressed and out of their control.

At the time, it was believed that any deformations and abnormalities that the women and young girls developed due to the poor working conditions were passed down to their children. Working men also brought home the carcinogens they were exposed to in the mines which inadvertently affected their wives, especially if they were pregnant, so it was believed that the abnormalities could be passed down through mutated genes and affect future children for generations. However, this has been proven to be incorrect.

In a table created by N.F.R Crafts, he compares average height, life expectancy, infant mortality, and more as indicators of the standards of living in Britain during the industrial revolution (Crafts 623). The research found that there was an overall increase in height, life expectancy and the infant mortality rate declined. The average height mainly increased however dipped slightly in 1850. This disproves the belief of the British at the time; although living and working conditions seemed poor, they were better than thought and there were increases in education and health (Crafts 617-639). Even though we know today that the living and working conditions did not affect human development, we can see evidence of these beliefs in the novel by H.G. Wells.

The Elois live above ground in giant buildings, as did the upper-class of Great Britain. They spent all of their time above ground, living lavish, happy lives. The Elois are pink, child-like, androgynous, and lazy. In the book, the Time Traveler describes the Eloi as “…a very beautiful and graceful creature, but indescribably frail. [There] flushed face reminded me of the more beautiful kind of consumptive – that hectic beauty of which we used to hear so much” (Wells 20). Similarly to the upper-classes of Britain, they did not work, so they evolved into a lazy species. Due to the wealth that upper-class people have, they are able to buy beauty products and pay for nice clothes and make themselves look beautiful. That forced beauty eventually evolved into natural beauty of the Elois.

On the other hand, the Morlocks live underground. They have big, lid-less eyes. They are extremely pale and they are carnivorous; they hunt the Eloi at night and eat them. They are extremely sensitive to the light, as well. The Morlocks came in to existence from the evolution of the lower-class people working in the underground mines during the industrial revolution. Due to the long, strenuous hours spent day after day underground, they evolved into a species that lived underground. The large, lid-less eyes the Morlocks have serve the evolutionary purpose of giving them advantages to being able to see well in the dark. They are extremely pale from spending their lives underground and not being exposed to light (Wells 43-44).

As Charles Darwin stated in *On the Origin of Species,* “…species have changed, and are still slowly changing by the preservation and accumulation of successive slight favorable variations” (Darwin 1). As exemplified in *The Time Machine* and the industrial revolution period in which it was written, the Eloi and the Morlocks evolved due to the favorable variations of the living conditions during the industrial revolution. This evolution occurred from the mutations of genes throughout time. Wells suggests that perhaps these mutations may occur in our world due to influences from our environment. As the Wells states in the novel, “So, in the end, above ground you must have the Haves, pursuing pleasure and comfort and beauty, and below ground the Have-nots; the Workers getting continually adapted to the conditions of their labour” (Wells 40-41). In the novel, *The Time Machine* by H.G. Wells, the author reveals that perhaps man is not simply a product of nature or nurture, but instead a complex intertwining of influences from both that result in who we are. This novel serves as a warning to us as humans to be careful about our living and working conditions because we never know how it just may affect future generations far down the road.

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