

Wells's Inverted Hierarchies: Exaggerated Expressions of Cultural Anxiety

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In H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine*, the Time Traveler transports to a futuristic society that is structurally reversed in comparison to the time period of Victorian England in which he currently lives. Structures of Victorian England still appear through a series of binary oppositions; however, the current cultural roles reverse—the dominant lose privilege, becoming subjugated, and the subjugated gain privilege, becoming dominant. While some critics discuss the reversal of standard Victorian structures and the conflicting messages they produce, they fail to acknowledge Wells's representation of cultural anxieties. By presenting a future society that reverses distinct hierarchies of the Time Traveler's present day, where society not only advances scientifically and technologically, but also changes economically and culturally, Wells proposes a devolved, threatening future that may come. Thus, through inverted hierarchies, including color (light v. dark), ethos (good v. evil), class (upper v. lower), characteristics (masculine v. feminine), and chain of command (human v. animal), Wells captures the intense anxieties of the present period.

At the beginning of the Time Traveler's visit to the future, the society on the surface is described in standard color binary oppositions of light versus dark, although the land of light is immediately cast as corrupt, expressing immediate anxieties of societal doom. Initially, the Time Traveler describes that “the whole earth had become a garden” (Wells 26). In capturing England as a vast garden, Wells portrays a picturesque and pastoral landscape. As Bernard Bergonzi defines, the land of the light represents “a paradisaal existence” (Bergonzi 195). Soon after arriving, the Time Traveler begins to immerse himself in such a serene existence, remarking the

fruit as “very delightful” and “in season all the time” (23). The garden imagery not only symbolically implies beauty, but also significantly bears fruit. Pairing both the garden and fruitful elements of the future together, Wells draws a parallel to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. In the book of Genesis, at first Adam and Eve remain steadfast and obedient to God’s instruction; however, they quickly fail and succumb to temptation—eating the fruits—resulting in the fall of mankind. Just like Adam from Genesis, the Time Traveler partakes in eating the fresh fruits, literally and metaphorically. He cannot resist the temptations of scientific and technological advancement, shown through his desperate desire to time travel. Considering the era in which Wells published *The Time Machine*, rapid innovation in Victorian England was well underway. Thus, given the journey of time travel itself and the discovery of such a future in the novella, Wells conveys the cultural anxieties surrounding another fall of mankind, with societal advancements on the rise.

Wells not only foreshadows a secondary fall of mankind, but also spotlights a futile future on the surface, lacking both purpose and power, further encapsulating the uneasiness of altering ideologies. Prior to the nineteenth century, Victorian England had established an interest in religion, which quickly shifted to science at the turn of the century. While scientific advancements ensued, primary concerns surrounding spiritual ideologies swarmed. That said, upon the Time Traveler’s arrival, he notes the land as a “waste of beautiful bushes and flowers, a long-neglected and yet weedless garden” (22). By using the terms “waste” and “neglect,” Wells associates a trivial and negative connotation with the future to come (22). As the Time Traveler continues his exploration, he notes the extravagant architecture as “abandoned ruins” (28). Thus, as opposed to a future of growth and prosperity, thought to be propelled by scientific and technological expansion, Wells’s future on the surface rather “decay[s]” to “ruins,” housing no

apparent purpose (28). Society, on first sight, seemingly functions like a utopia, run by “purposeless energy of mankind” (28). The word utopia stems from Greek origins, quite literally meaning “no place.” In other words, by omitting true purpose, or “place,” Wells inscribes the prominent doubts of Victorian England, as society departs from spiritual to solely scientific ideas.

With omitted conceptions of purpose in the land of light, Wells sufficiently stages darkness as dominant, emphasizing the exacerbated fear of a scientific-based society. After further exploration, the Time Traveler learns of life beneath the light surface—a robustly dark and underground realm. Upon entering the deep, dark land below, the Time Traveler instantly expresses feelings of both “terror” and “fear” (38). In addition, he describes “big machines” situated within “grotesque black shadows” (44). In contrast to the land of light, the land of darkness holds a source of power—machinery. While no explicit function is given to the machines in use, the presence of them indicates power, and thus grants darkness greater value. As the light world is represented by symbols of both greenery and fruit, the dark, underground world is defined by machinery and meat, alluding to a savage and satanic atmosphere. As Bergonzi points out, the narrative shifts from “paradisaal imagery” to dominant “demonic imagery” (Bergonzi 200). Building off Bergonzi’s idea of the “demonic,” the Time Traveler is quick to note, among his other observations, the smell of “freshly shed blood,” hinting at cannibalism (44). Given the powerful nature of machinery, paired with sinister undertones, Wells not only accredits value via power to darkness, pointing to the inversion of the color binary, but also emphasizes its dangerous qualities, mirroring fears of a scientific-based society.

Wells simultaneously collapses the predominant ethos binary of good versus evil, exemplifying circulating thoughts of corruption, specifically devolution, as scientific and

technological development dominates Victorian England. The common ideals of ethos, good versus evil, are strategically overturned in Wells's crafted future; the Morlocks, or figures of evil, rule over the Eloi, supposed figures of good. Critics Paul Cantor and Peter Hufnagel analyze this dynamic through an imperial lens, suggesting the two species are analogous to tribes, as represented by colonialist ideology. For instance, the Eloi, or good tribe, fit the mold of "peaceful, docile, and friendly," while the Morlocks, or evil tribe, are casted as "beastly, warlike, and hostile" (Cantor and Hufnagel 231). In considering the retrospective binary opposition, good would seemingly be accredited with greater value and withstand the lesser, evil. In the context of Wells's proposed futuristic society, good is most closely associated with the Eloi, who are characteristically "very beautiful and graceful creature[s]" (20). However, aside from their beauty, the Time Traveler notes their "fragile features" and "intellectual level of one of our five-year-old children" (22). Thus, the Eloi appear as a weak, shallow species, which exposes the anxiety of corruption rising amidst scientific and technological advancement—as technology evolves, humanity, and human ethics, may devolve.

Wells's representation of the standard of good, or Eloi, embodies another countercultural fear of corruption; scientific advancement may lead not only to devolution, but also demoralization. The Eloi simply and safely exist, "playing gently, in bathing in the river, in making love in a half-playful fashion, in eating fruit and sleeping" (35). Therefore, from the Time Traveler's description alone, the future figures of good have apparently lost touch with morality. Through Thomas Henry Huxley's exploration of the struggle for existence, or lack thereof, civilization has historically been a means to "escape" from nature, which he categorizes as a "non-moral" realm (Huxley 166, 164). That said, the Eloi's society on the surface is described as a "garden," initially indicating corrupt values of morality (26). Huxley additionally

contributes that “the human race” has tried to “found a kingdom of Man” governed by morality; however, their “deep-seated organic impulses” interrupt, leading them down a “non-moral course” (Huxley 166, 167). Moreover, the benevolent figures of good in Wells’s futuristic land are not only inherently corrupt because of their sole scientific, or biological make-up, but also perpetuate both the existence and invasion of evil.

Since Wells’s figures of virtue do not employ moral principles, which precede power and dominion, the Morlocks take over in a ravenous reign, portraying the angst of an evil, fiendish future—one without a righteous reign. The Morlocks are biologically cast as both the demonic-like creatures and the technological race of the future, placing them in a position of privilege and power. For one, the Morlocks are given superior rank because of their innate abilities to survive and ever-present struggle for existence. Simply put: the Morlocks have become the powerful predator, while the Eloi are the “fattened cattle, which the ant-like Morlocks preserved and preyed upon” (50). Huxley discusses the dynamic of predator and prey, under the scope of “moral sympathies” (Huxley 164). In his metaphor, he dissects the relationship between a deer and a wolf. The “men like the deer” are “innocent and good,” whereas “men such as the wolf,” or predator, are seen as “malignant and bad” for ravenously pouncing on prey (Huxley 164). Likewise, the Time Traveler alludes to the Morlocks as predators themselves, and “malign” ones at that (46). By emphasizing the Eloi as innocent, dainty prey and the Morlocks as vicious, aggressive predators, Wells bestows rulership to the Morlocks through their savage means of survival. Similarly, Cantor and Hufnagel dissect European rule, in terms of the ideological good versus evil tribal roles. The Eloi, on one hand, are “submissive” and Morlocks, on the other hand, are “far from being submissive” (Cantor and Hufnagel 231). In fact, they suggest, like many imperialist romances, the Morlocks embody the “evil cannibals” (Cantor and Hufnagel

231). While their imperial argument conveys the inverted dynamics of dominance, evil ruling over good, Cantor and Hufnagel overlook the cultural apprehensions of technological breakthrough, reflected through this reversal.

Because the Morlocks are regarded as the technological race, their evil reign derives deeper significance—presenting coming-of-age technology as the source of turmoil. The Morlocks’ evil power pervades, and the species are placed into a dominant role because they embody strength via machine. As the Time Traveler navigates through the Morlocks’ underground world, he notes the “noise of machinery grow[ing] louder” and indecipherable “grotesque” shadows (44). He later reflects on being “ill-equipped,” an expression of unsettlement (44). That said, the Time Traveler is overcome by fear, struggling to identify the Morlocks, as he is immersed in all-encompassing darkness. Further, the Morlocks seem to mold into the fabric of the machinery itself. With the Morlocks cast as evil and molding into technology, then, Wells assigns technology as the creator of chaos in future Victorian England. As Cantor and Hufnagel assert, “nothing humanity creates is built to last” (Cantor and Hufnagel 242). Therefore, using Cantor and Hufnagel’s foundation, Wells represents the societal notion that rising technologies are both terrifying and terminal.

Wells branches another link to societal anxieties of the day, stemming from economic changes, by first proposing standard ideologies of class, where the upper class dominates the lower, subjugated class. At the peak of the Victorian era, Britain became the richest country in the world; however, it was at the expense of the working class, who worked long hours and in harsh conditions. As seen in *The Time Machine*, on the surface, the Eloi characteristically fall into the upper class, living a carefree life of consumption, situated in earth’s bright garden, or future England. Below the surface, the Morlocks fit the image of the lower class, operating the

machinery, and conducting heavy labor tasks under poor, dark, “very stuffy and oppressive” working conditions (44). Moreover, the Morlocks’ preliminary presentation reflects dominant Victorian views of industrialization, where the lower, laborious class worked in raucous, grim environments. Critic John Huntington inserts his own argument of class, one that considers Wells’s apparent “class awareness” (Huntington 222). Huntington claims that the class dynamics of the future society are intended to critique the dominant and leisure classes by emphasizing the Eloi’s “elegant upper-class aestheticism” (Huntington 225). However, there is a considerable underlying resemblance between the upper-middle class and the Morlocks, grounds for constructing an inversion.

To flip the distinct order of class within the futuristic realm, Wells acquaints the reader with male professionals of the upper-middle class, which later link to the Morlocks of the future. Using a frame narrative, Wells begins by introducing male professionals of the upper-middle class. Before the recollection of transporting to the future, readers meet the Psychologist, the Provincial Mayor, the Medical Man, and of course, the main character, the Time Traveler. Each of these men represent a sector of the upper-middle class in Victorian England. At first, the Time Traveler associates the Eloi with the upper class, enjoying the leisure above, and the Morlocks with the lower class, ensuing rigorous labor below. He soon discovers, after venturing through the “underworld,” that his theory is inaccurate (40). Instead, the Morlocks are the class with power because of the machinery—the source of societal power—in which they house and supposedly operate. In fact, the Time Traveler notes the powerful “throb-and-hum of machinery pumping,” during his descent underground (43). While the upper-middle class men fill positions of power, situated in scientific or technological fields, the Morlocks live in and are a part of the source of power. It’s through this delegation of power that Wells both achieves the reversal of

the standard class hierarchy and creates a candid resemblance between the upper-middle class and the Morlocks.

Wells's link, connecting the upper-middle class and the Morlocks, then, represents the upper-class dismay of the lower classes gaining power and emerging middle classes. Along with other members of the upper-middle class, the Time Traveler himself identifies, to some degree, with the Morlocks, most significantly through his underlying, evil urges. First, within the Morlocks' hellish environment, the Time Traveler notes that he is more in his "element" with "huge bulks of big machines" on either side of him (53). He additionally comments on his "certain weakness for mechanism" (53). Similarly, the Time Traveler regards the Morlocks as "mechanical," at once joining the two together through science and technology (46). In terms of the devilish desires, the Time Traveler returns and is "starving for a bit of meat" and expresses his longing "to kill a Morlock or so" (14, 54). Roger Luckhurst touches briefly on such correlations, specifically the Morlocks, in relation to the Time Traveler. Luckhurst notes that the two have "the same mechanical bent, the same longing for meat, the same disordered nights, [and] the same blood lust to kill" (Luckhurst 259). In the following lines, he makes the connection clear—the Morlocks are the "suitable heirs" of the Time Traveler (Luckhurst 259). Adding the element of an evil and demonic depiction to the equation, the Morlocks portrayal and permit of power may be akin to the rise of middle classes, showcasing horrifying upper-class conceptions, as they feared changes in control.

In addition to the rise of middle classes, their professional roles convey critical concerns of obscurity, surrounding class changes in Victorian England. With the rise of the middle classes, roles became increasingly unsteady and unclear. While Luckhurst establishes a strong connection between the Morlocks and the Time Traveler, an upper-middle class professional, he omits

discussion of their functions. For example, referring to the Morlocks' machinery—their presented function—the Time Traveler finds himself “puzzling about the machines” (53). In the same way, the group of professional men were “puzzled” about the function of the Time Traveler's model and machine (11). Mirroring a resemblance between the Morlocks and professional class, who work in both scientific and technological fields, not only conveys the reversal of class roles, but also connects to the befuddlement of new functions. Thus, Wells highlights key cultural concerns of the unknown, extending from unclear class constructs to ambiguous gender roles.

Wells simultaneously inverts engraved cultural gender roles via characteristics, exhibiting female power, as opposed to male power, in future Victorian England. Throughout history, the enduring binary opposition of masculine and feminine has privileged the male with dominance and power. In turning to Kathryn Hume, she establishes the historical definitions of both masculine and feminine characteristics. Masculinity is associated with “culture, light, the Sun, law, reason, consciousness, the right hand, land, and rulership,” whereas femininity is akin to “chaos, darkness, the Moon, intuition, feeling, the left hand, water, and the unconscious” (Hume 208). However, when the nineteenth century came around, the binary was brought into question. That said, Hume briefly mentions that the Morlocks are “secondarily marked with unconscious feminine” (209). While Hume argues that Wells intentionally denies clear attributes to the Eloi and Morlocks, she evades other prevalent similarities between the Morlocks and femininity, including darkness and chaos. Contributing to the connection, the Time Traveler broaches the Morlocks' “soft hand[s],” a quality also associated with femininity (43). Thus, since the Morlocks embody feminine characteristics, even though they are ambivalent, Wells represents female power within the dominant species.

Connecting the Morlocks to female power, then, Wells's depiction deciphers innate male anxieties, regarding female empowerment. Up to the late nineteenth century, women were restricted to a private, subjugated sphere; however, they reached a pinnacle point, breaking through into the public sphere, historically dominated by men. Moreover, the New Woman emerged in 1894, representing radical change, including women's rights, education, and, especially, occupation. By doing so, male anxieties reached an all-time high, which are woven into *The Time Machine*, published in the following year, 1895. Further, such male anxieties are found in the identity of the Morlocks. In addition to the links between darkness, chaos, and softness, Wells attributes machinery to the Morlocks, who embody female characteristics and, subsequently, power. While Hume hints that the Morlocks' operation of machinery is associated "in Western eyes with the masculine rather than the feminine," one must note that Wells witnessed the rise of the New Woman, while writing *The Time Machine*, and may have forecasted their soon attainment of male jobs (Hume 209). More specifically, by the twentieth century, when World War I broke out, women obtained once male occupations as laborers, running machines and powerful equipment. Thus, Wells not only reflects, but also exaggerates cultural anxieties of female empowerment through the Morlocks, who are cast as the evil and inherently violent characters of the novella.

Turning to the violent nature of the Morlocks, Wells inverts the chain of command, specifically human versus animal, placing the wild, inhuman creatures in control of the cultivated, human creatures. As the Time Traveler transports thousands of years into the coming age, he encounters two devolved categories of mankind—the Eloi and the Morlocks. The Time Traveler explicitly identifies both as descendants of humanity; however, they are separated through descriptions. In his first encounters with the Eloi, he recognizes them as "pretty little

people” that speak in a “very sweet and liquid tongue” (21). The Time Traveler also emphasizes their “childlike ease,” which places them closely akin to humans (21). In contrast, the Morlocks are explicitly described as “nauseatingly inhuman” and supposed cannibals (45). When he descends into the Morlocks’ underground world, he realizes they are “carnivorous,” eating a “red joint” (44). He quickly questions “what large animal” it could be, since no animals exist on the surface (44). In other words, Wells hints that the animalistic and savage Morlocks are at the peak of the pecking order, eating Eloi—our human descendants.

Ultimately, by inverting the hierarchy of chain of command, Wells displays the pervading panic of violence outbreaking beside cultural change. Considering the Morlocks’ supremacy, the means of gaining power is through violent and savage means, such as cannibalism. Violence, in general terms, is seen as a means to exert control, or dominance, over another individual or group. Tying into Victorian England, violence became recognized as a nation-wide fear, as long-standing, subjugated groups began to rise up and gain control. Since society was in a vulnerable state, with cultural changes rapidly occurring, they feared a following fight for control was in order. With these violent Victorian visions in mind, Wells’s futuristic society suggests the Morlocks successfully reached the top tier, or the highest chain of command, partly because of their savagery. Luckhurst narrows in on the savagery of the Morlocks and suggests that such “savage energy [is] apparently required for the evolutionary struggle to survive” (Luckhurst 258). While Luckhurst focuses on how savagery results in survival, Huxley refers to the “war of each against all,” relating to Victorian England’s overwhelming concerns of violent warfare for power (Huxley 167). Thus, through imagining a dystopia with a distorted dichotomy, in terms of chain of command, Wells effectively expresses the anxious attitudes of violence circulating simultaneously to cultural change in Victorian England.

The Time Machine is rooted in cultural anxiety, specifically of Victorian England amidst the nineteenth century—a century of social upheaval. Victorian England not only started advancing scientifically and technologically, but also changing economically and culturally, creating pandemonium in the present day. While Wells showcases scientific and technological achievement through time travel, he also spotlights inverted hierarchies at the heart of the novella, reflecting societal fears through fantasy. Thus, through reversed binaries, including color (light v. dark), ethos (good v. evil), class (upper v. lower), characteristics (masculine v. feminine), and chain of command (human v. animal), Wells presents the inflated fears of the present period. By exaggerating expressions of cultural anxiety in a mere fantasy, Wells ultimately suggests they're far-fetched from reality, as is the year 802,701.

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