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“Human Spiders”: Intellectual
Observers, Degeneration and
Darwinism in H.G. Wells’ *The Time
Machine* (1895)

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Abstract

H.G. Wells' novella *The Time Machine* (1895) tells the story of The Time Traveller who travels to the year 802,701. There, he encounters two evolutionary progressions of humanity. One, Morlocks, have been read as representations of Victorian workers and poor, and the other, the Eloi, as representations of the aristocracy. The Time Traveller represents the middle class. The novella is often seen as an allegory for Victorian social discourses, of which class divide, degeneration theory, and Darwinism are discussed in this thesis. In *The Time Machine*, Wells presents his vision of the future as it may turn out, based on said discourses. This analysis builds on the combined findings of previous research, while contributing by connecting Victorian discourses about class, degeneration, and Darwinism into a single analysis – an element that previous research lacks. This thesis also introduces a new concept called the “Intellectual Observer”, which describes Victorian middle-class men who were active in popularising degeneration and Darwinist discourses. This thesis argues that the Victorian middle class played a central role in establishing degeneration theory as an instrument of “othering” the upper and lower classes. It also shows how Morlocks and Eloi exhibit both physical and moral symptoms of degeneration – though, as will be established, despite degenerationist practitioners' convictions, degeneration theory was never grounded in science. Finally, this thesis illustrates how Morlocks exemplify a nightmarishly savage and animalistic outcome of human evolution. These findings are not only relevant for future readings of *The Time Machine*, but also serve to illustrate how topical discourses influenced the literature of the Victorian period.

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Introduction

In the midst of the pessimistic and apprehensive atmosphere of fin-de-siècle England, H.G. Wells published his debut romance novella *The Time Machine*. It tells the story of a Time Traveller who relates the details of his journey to the year 802,701 to a company of men. During his journey, he encountered what he assumes to be two future races derived from the late-Victorian upper and lower classes. One race, called Eloi, are beautiful and peaceful, but frail and unintelligent. The other, called Morlocks, are subterranean beasts who prey upon Eloi. *The Time Machine* is commonly regarded as an allegory for Victorian discourses about class, degeneration, and Darwinism.¹

At the time of *The Time Machine*'s publication in 1895, Victorian England existed in a calamity of anxieties tied to, as mentioned, class, degeneration, and Darwinism. Due to the clear influences of late 19th-century discourses found in Wells' novella, the text can be seen as a representation of this period. In this thesis, my focus is primarily on Morlocks, who are depicted as the future evolution of the proletariat and residuum.² They are cannibalistic creatures that shun light. In contrast, Eloi "once [...] the favoured aristocracy", are now weak and infantile (Wells 55). Finally, the Time Traveller is an Intellectual Observer and representative of the Victorian middle class. The Intellectual Observer is my own term and denotes middle-class well-read men who partook in degeneration discourse. It builds, in part, on Stephen Arata's concept of the "professional reader", as will be explained later in this thesis.

Today, *The Time Machine* is considered a staple of English fin-de-siècle literature. Many have connected the novella to the topics mentioned above, with both the work and its author frequently mentioned in discussions about Victorian degeneration and Darwinist discourse. In his 1996 study of British fin-de-siècle fiction, Arata notes that Eloi and Morlocks, creatures in the novella assumed to be distant progenies of Victorians, could be interpreted as visions of a degenerate future (26). In 2009, Theresa Jamieson made use of Arata's study in her comparison of *The Time Machine* and *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, wherein she analyses masculinity, degeneration theory, and Darwinism in both works (73). However, despite the extensive research already done on the topic of class, degeneration, and Darwinism in *The Time Machine*, all three issues have not, hitherto, been sufficiently juxtaposed in existing analyses. Pre-existing research also lacks thorough discussions about the impact of the middle-class perspective on the presentation of Morlocks

¹ Arata 26; Bergonzi 42; Pick 157.

and Elois in the story. Consequently, questions about these topics' interactions with each other in *The Time Machine* still, more than a century past its publication, remain underexplored.

The aim of this thesis is to build upon and fill in the gaps of previous research by discussing three central themes – the Intellectual Observer, degeneration, and Darwinism. I argue that these elements are so closely interwoven both in *The Time Machine* and in their historical and cultural context that they cannot be discussed in isolation from each other. Degeneration, for instance, is nearly inseparable from both Darwinism and class. The theory of evolution had a great influence on degeneration theory, and degeneration was in turn used as a tool for middle-class “otherings” of aristocrats and the poor. Following a background section to establish historical context, the thesis will first discuss a concept that I choose to call the Intellectual Observer. As mentioned above, Intellectual Observers were middle-class men who were considered well-read enough to discuss degeneration and Darwinism – characteristics that The Time Traveller exhibits. The section will contain a discussion about class and the use of degeneration theory to “other” aristocrats and the poor, represented by Elois and Morlocks in the novella. Secondly, I will present key concepts in late-Victorian discourse about degeneration theory. This will be linked to the moral and physical portrayal of Morlocks and, in contrast, Elois. Finally, a similar discussion about *The Time Machine* and Darwinism will follow, where degeneration connected to Morlocks and Elois is put into the perspective of a progressively more scientifically motivated and pessimistic Victorian society. This thesis will conclude that the Morlocks and Elois in Wells' novella are products of Victorian discourse about degeneration and Darwinism, and that Intellectual Observers, like the Time Traveller, were fundamental factors in the realisation of said discourses.

Background

One purpose of this thesis is to illustrate how the class divides of late 19th-century England spurred on degeneration discourse, traces of which are found in *The Time Machine*. In simple terms, the Victorian era was marked by a tension between the middle class and other classes, consequently manifesting a sort of anxiety among the middle class. Daniel Pick, whose extensive work on depictions of degeneration in 19th-century Europe has been most helpful in my research, writes that the middle class feared a revolution of social revenge by the urban

² “The proletariat” refers to the working class. “The residuum” refers to the impoverished unemployed class. The proletariat and residuum are often lumped together in discussions about degeneration.

poor and proletariat (202). In the wake of ever-growing class divides, the middle class isolated themselves from contact with both the proletariat and aristocracy. Consequently, discourse about an accessible and contemporary topic – degeneration – became an effective tool in alienating those groups.

Degeneration had been a popular discussion point for a long time, but in the 1880s it reached new levels and gave rise to the new term “urban degeneration” (Pick 201-202). Arata writes,

The study of degeneration was invariably put in the service of an empowered middle class. It was an effective means of “othering” large groups of people by making them as deviant, criminal, psychotic, defective, simple, hysterical, diseased, primitive, regressive, or just dangerous. (Arata 16-17)

In a work that explores fin-de-siècle degeneration discourse, Stephen Karschay writes that degeneration was thought to mainly ail the working class and aristocracy, whereas the middle class posed as nearly immune specialists. Especially the residuum was subject of othering. They were the poorest of all city dwellers, living in parts of London that were seen as equally alien and frightening as remote corners of the British Empire (9). In the extremities of the discourse, the residuum was said to be hopeless, unemployed parasites of society, completely beyond salvation (Pick 197-198). Affected by the “city disease”, the residuum was a product of what Bergonzi describes as the hellish conditions of an urban industrial nightmare (Bergonzi 53, 55).³

Even for the middle class, urban life was believed to have negative side effects. Nordau confirmed this in *Degeneration*, translated to English just after the publication of *The Time Machine* in 1895. Nordau claimed that consuming contaminated food, breathing impure air, and prolonged nervous excitement could lead to degeneration even in the middle class (Karschay 10). Aristocrats were likely degenerates, too, thanks to their effete tendencies (18). But for the most part, symptoms of degeneration were typical qualities that characterised the Victorian urban lower classes like the proletariat and residuum (Olson 279).

Arata writes that practically anyone – regardless of their academic background and predominantly individuals of the Victorian middle class – could study degeneration theory to such an extent that they acquired the “common sense” that was necessary in identifying degeneracy in others (4). He uses the term “professional reader” to describe the type of man who was well-read and experienced enough to assert himself as an amateur

³“City disease” is another term for “degeneration”.

specialist in the subject (3). Below, I will build on Arata's concept of the "professional reader", though I will use my own concept, "the Intellectual Observer", to describe the middle-class men among whom degeneration discourse took place.

Degeneration is often referred to as a theory.⁴ The word's original meaning, with its roots in the 17th century, was something like spiritual fallenness. But as both Karschay and Heggie note, the term's meaning became ambivalent and vague in the context of Victorian discourse. It could refer to physical deviations, racial decline, or to both moral and spiritual decay (Karschay 11-12; Heggie 179). A unanimous definition of "degeneration" was never established between scientific fields. In fact, Arata writes that degeneration theory lacked connections to science, and Heggie even calls it an "urban legend" (Arata 4; Heggie 180-181). In the end, what defined degeneration was just a deviation from the norm – a very vague definition that was easily appropriated for everyday use (Arata 15).

As degeneration became an increasingly popular topic during the 19th century, many applied themselves to studying it as a science. Among the most noteworthy thinkers in Europe were Frenchman Bénédict Morel, Italian Cesare Lombroso, and the remarkably influential German Max Nordau. British E. Ray Lankester also proved influential, though Arata notes a "relative absence of sharply defined schools of thought in Britain" within the field of degeneration theory (4). Though Nordau's *Degeneration* might summarise the European degeneration discourse up until 1895, his work was translated to English only after *The Time Machine*'s publication. The arguments in this thesis will therefore not be based on said text, though a future longer version could include such a discussion.

Additionally, there are some things to be said about the extent to which degeneration truly concerned the middle-class Victorians. Whereas writers like Karschay and Arata emphasise said group's interest in the subject, Pick argues that middle-class Victorians were more concerned with crime rates than the threat of degeneration (Pick 179-180). And yet, he draws several parallels between degeneration discourse and concerns about Darwinism and criminality. It appears Pick attempts to counter an exaggerated idea about the impact of degeneration discourse as an isolated topic. Instead, he sees that degeneration theory only gained momentum when put into perspective of other discourses.

Having listed some of the believed causes of degeneration, I will now describe the symptoms. The Victorians sometimes drew an unclear line between *cause* and *symptom*, leading to, for example, criminality and poverty to be labelled as both (Olson 279; Karschay 10). Physical signs of the disease included, as listed by Morel, "a small or badly conformed head, a predominantly morbid temperament, special deformities [and] structural anomalies of

the organs” (Karschay 13). Degeneration theory distinguished itself from older sciences, like physiognomy, by also emphasising qualities related to morality. Arata mentions outward deviating appearances betraying the “rotteness within”, which was an essential piece in concluding a diagnosis (19-21). Symptoms of moral and mental decay were sterility, madness, imbecility, suicide, unemployment, or alcoholism (Arata 3; Olson 279). When these symptoms are put into the perspective of other Victorian discourses, such as socialism or Darwinism, it becomes clear that they are strongly connected to questions of class divide and fears of evolution and human decay.

Degeneration discourse changed a lot in the latter half of the 19th century, though the topic existed as far back as the 17th century. However, it was not until the 1850s, following the publication of Morel’s *Degeneration and Its Causes* in 1857, that it really gained attention (Karschay 12). In the same decade, the word was used in an issue of *The Lancet*, denoting internal deterioration connected to decadence of certain races (Pick 189-190). *On the Origin of Species* (1859) by Charles Darwin would also turn out to have a great impact on degeneration discourse. The theory of evolution and degeneration theory would become inseparable to British degenerationists, as will become evident in the exploration of the rise of Darwinism in Victorian England.

The publication of Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* would forever change humanity’s perception of its own creation and connections to animals. At once, the idea of man’s divine purpose and racial superiority was threatened (Richter 8). By the late 19th century, biology rather than religion held the answers to questions about man’s descent (Hale 1-3). Consequently, as Richard Olson writes about the influence of scientism on 19th-century Europe, the theory of evolution “contributed both to the growth of agnosticism and to the notion that science and religion were in conflict with one another” (234). This is especially true for the time period following the publication of Darwin’s second work, *The Descent of Man* (1871), wherein he directly considers the evolution of humanity and its descent from apes (235). Unlike degeneration discourse, Darwinism was largely developed in England, with influential voices including Charles Darwin himself, his inspiration Thomas Robert Malthus, and T.H. Huxley, also called “Darwin’s bulldog” thanks to his vigorous guard-dog-like defence of Darwin’s theories.

Richter, whose work maps out the impact of Darwinism on subsequent literature, writes that Victorians, despite their shock, were initially optimistic about evolution. Surely, man would continue to improve through natural selection, which guaranteed survival of the fittest. Alas, by the Fin de Siècle that optimism had turned into cultural pessimism – a

⁴ Degeneration is also referred to as “urban degeneration” or “city disease” in this thesis.

uniquely European mindset at the time (Richter 15). At the realisation that evolution did *not*, in fact, assure progress, but could also result in *devolution*, the Victorians faced the sudden, pressing fear of the fall of civilization as a consequence of regression to primitive or animalistic stages (9-10). Hence, bestial or savage qualities were thought dangerous. Criminals, Pick notes, were a typical group to which animalistic characteristics could be ascribed, though comparing crooks to animals was not exactly a new phenomenon. Predating Darwinist discourse, there were ideas about a “criminal race” that bred and reproduced in particular districts (183). One early literary example can be found in Charles Dickens’ novel *Oliver Twist* (1838), where the manipulative character Fagin is likened to a beast, with teeth resembling those of a dog or rat (Dickens 417). Still, such comparisons gained a different connotation following *On the Origins of Species*. For instance, criminals were likened to diabolic animals, while the internationally influential Italian degenerationist Lombroso, whose focus was criminality, claimed to have identified physical proof of atavism in the anatomy of criminals (Pick 194; Arata 33-34). Darwin also discussed mental deficiencies caused by physical regression, primarily identifying symptoms that were commonly associated with animals, savages, primitive humans, and the poor (Richter 10-11).

Uniquely “human” qualities were identified during this period. As Arata writes, late Victorians feared the loss of culture, creativity, spirituality, and morals (1). Morals were an especially important attribute, as it proved an individual’s capability of feeling sympathy. Therefore, a lack of morals was a sign of mental derangement (Olson 240). Some Victorians became greatly concerned with upholding the good sides of mankind, fearing that degenerates, criminals, and atavists would cause irreversible decay of the entire race. There was talk of a new sort of capital, not economic, but physical (Pick 197). Consequently, eugenics became a topic of discussion in the 1880s. The term refers to a purification of the human race through planned breeding of good specimens and eradication of weak and degenerate groups (Olson 290). Hence, the population would have to reproduce in such a way that the strongest specimens bore children, while the weak, like urban degenerates, were prohibited from it (Pick 197).

The Intellectual Observer

The role of the Intellectual Observer in *The Time Machine*, personified by the Time Traveller, might seem insignificant at first glance. Instead, one is persuaded to pay attention to what the Time Traveller observes in the far future rather than wonder *why* his perspective

is the way it is. This section will, therefore, show that the Time Traveller's status as Intellectual Observer really does have an impact on the depiction of Morlocks and Elois alike in the novella. First, a definition of the concept is in place.

I cannot take full credit for the concept of the Intellectual Observer, as it is originally based on, but not identical to, Stephen Arata's concept of the professional reader. Arata describes his professional reader/man as an authoritative, always male, fictional character that commonly occurred in Victorian literature. Imagine the likes of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's detective character Sherlock Holmes. The professional reader is an expert at interpretation, who values close reading and possesses training that enables him to "extract 'useful' meaning from a welter of often confusing signs" (Arata 4). The term is reminiscent of the *flâneur*, which denotes a man who idly observes his surroundings, and is in turn observed himself, as he strolls through urban environments (Parkhurst Ferguson 27). However, unlike the *flâneur*, both the professional reader and Intellectual Observer have active roles in learning about and discussing social issues like degeneration. The Intellectual Observer resembles the professional reader in all these aspects. However, additionally, the Intellectual Observer is always middle-class, indulges in intellectual discourses with fellow Intellectual Observers, and displays the aversion towards the aristocracy, proletariat, and residuum that, as described in the background section, was characteristic of the Victorian middle class. In short, whereas Arata highlights the importance of reading as a quality of the professional reader, I instead focus on the crucial role of spoken and written discourse as a medium for Intellectual Observers to spread ideas.

Finally, before it is time to look closer at the Intellectual Observers of *The Time Machine*, one cannot mention degeneration discourse without also mentioning "common sense". As Arata states, "degeneration 'theory' [in Britain] was less a coherent system than a form of common sense" (Arata 3). Because the theory did not stand on solid enough ground to be completely accepted as science, degeneration rather became "popular wisdom" and anyone who wanted could become an amateur specialist (Karschay 14; Arata 3-4). The issue with common sense is that while it implies a universal shared bank of knowledge and morals, it is mostly uncoordinated and rarely transcends time. It usually only makes sense in a specific time period and culture. Arata quotes Antonio Gramsci when he calls common sense a sort of "'folklore' of philosophy" (Arata 16). Nevertheless, an individual who, in Victorian times, possessed the ability to detect degeneration could be considered very wise.

I will now elaborate on my previous statement that the Time Traveller embodies the stereotypical Intellectual Observer. In fact, he is as good of an example of the concept as Sherlock Holmes is of Arata's concept of the professional reader. First of all, the Time

Traveller fulfils all the requirements for a professional reader. But beyond that, he qualifies as an Intellectual Observer. For one, he is middle-class. In the novella's first and final scenes, he is in the company of a group of other middle-class men with whom he discusses scientific topics. As Bergonzi writes, the rich were very much distanced from the other classes, especially labourers (51-52). The Time Traveller cannot be an aristocrat, because he socialises with the middle class, as proven by the professional titles of his friends: the Medical Man, the Provincial Mayor, the Psychologist, the Journalist, etc. Neither is he a worker or poor, because as the Time Traveller states several times, Victorian labourers lived mostly underground. In contrast, he owns and lives in a house in Richmond (Wells 16).

Another key in identifying the Time Traveller as middle-class is his rancour against the other classes – an approach that Bergonzi supports (56). In the future, Elois are the “wretched aristocracy-in-decay” that “had drifted towards [...] feeble prettiness” and “a general dwindling in size, strength, and intelligence” (Wells 59, 73, 48). Morlocks represent London labourers who had been “cut off from the natural surface of the earth” and forced to evolve into subterranean, nocturnal beings (47). And yet, another interpretation could be that the divide between Elois and Morlocks is not quite as black-and-white as the divide between aristocrats and poor. Questions about the future of the middle class arise. Perhaps they merged with the upper class – a more likely scenario than a conjunction with the despised lower classes. Nevertheless, the Time Traveller opposes such an interpretation when, following his first encounter with a Morlock, he reasons that not only had “the exclusive tendency of richer people” restricted the poor's access to free movement by purchasing land, but also that the “aristocracy, armed with a perfected science” had “[triumphed] over nature and the fellow man” (Wells 47-48). The Time Traveller's dislike for the upper classes is evident in his disappointment in their betrayal of the working class, the consequence of which he sees in the future. As he puts it, “man had thrust his brother man out of the ease and the sunshine” (56). On the other hand, while he expresses sympathy with the lower classes at several points, his immense disgust at the Morlocks is evident: “...there was an altogether new element in the sickening quality of the Morlocks—a something inhuman and malign. Instinctively I loathed them” (55). The Time Traveller mourns the decay of man he sees before him – the materialisation of the fin-de-siècle fear of the end of civilisation.

As mentioned above, the novella begins and ends with the Time Traveller in his own time, where he is in the company of other Intellectual Observers. Both Scherr and Bergonzi reason that this structure functions to validate the Time Traveller's account of his endeavours into the future, as well as establish the character as late-Victorian (Scherr 125; Bergonzi 43-44). Jamieson suggests that the presence of the respectable Intellectual

Observers – who in turn discuss the legitimacy of the Time Traveller’s story – was intentional to serve as authentication of the fictional story as a whole (76).⁵ The group resembles one that would typically have discourses about degeneration theory in Victorian times, though that topic specifically is not discussed in the dialogues of *The Time Machine*. Instead, the Time Traveller presents the discourse as a monologue, or rather as an inner reasoning between his emotional response and “common sense” as he tries to make sense of how humanity ended up as Eloi and Morlocks. The discourse is internalised in his character. Meanwhile, his guests *also* serve as voices of common sense. There are roughly ten of these characters, including the narrator, who all represent different professions and personalities. Curiously, as mentioned above, the narrator calls each man by their profession. For example, the Phycologist and the Medical Man both pose as the most critical voices in the story. Contrarily, the Provincial Mayor is less outspoken in his doubt. The narrator explains the titles in the first line of the book, as he first mentions the Time Traveller: “for so it will be convenient to speak of him” (Wells 1).

According to Karschay, physical degeneration among city dwellers had sparked a “vigorous debate” by the end of the century (9). The Victorians were concerned about not only the negative effects of city life on the health of the urban population, but also the long-lasting consequences it could have to the future of the entire race. They developed ways to identify degeneration as one of the greatest threats to mankind. Accordingly, degenerates were medically defined to such a degree that they were supposed to be “easily recognisable” and could be segregated from normal, healthy people (2). The middle class embodied themselves as the norm, from which deviation occurred and could be detected in members of other classes (4). Normativity, along with evolutionary anxieties, is the motivator behind the Time Traveller’s depiction of Morlocks and Eloi.⁶ In the words of Karschay, “normativity is pre-existent to action” in that a person acts based on their understanding of the cultural norm (16). The Time Traveller feels ill at ease upon the realisation that his expectations about normativity will not correlate to the culture in 802,701 AD. In Victorian England, he may well have exemplified the physical (white, male), economical (middle-class), intellectual, and moral norm. Yet, his confidence is shaken when it dawns upon him that the norm may not have withstood the test of time:

⁵ Jamieson simply calls the individuals “gentlemen” (76).

⁶ See more about evolutionary anxiety in the “Darwinism” section.

What might not have happened to men? What if cruelty had grown into a common passion? What if in this interval the race had lost its manliness, and had developed into something inhuman, unsympathetic, and overwhelmingly powerful? (Wells 24)

His musings, as it happens, may as well have been prophetic, for many of his worries come true. The Eloi have indeed lost their manliness, as the male and female gender alike had lost their distinct features overtime and eventually become more androgynous, bordering on effeminate (Wells 31). Meanwhile, the Morlocks have turned into strong, violent and “inhuman sons of men” (59). From these premises, the Time Traveller progressively grows resentful of Morlocks and Eloi alike. Not only are they failures of evolution, but also repulsive in relation to his norm. As I show below, he frequently observes and applies degenerate symptoms to both races, such as low intellect, violence, and physical traits. His aversion to these traits is anchored in the norm that the middle class sought to establish to alienate both rich and poor. To repeat, degeneration was never a scientifically established or accepted medical term – everything in *The Time Machine* that relates Morlocks and Eloi to degeneration does so, from a middle-class standpoint, to alienate and ostracise them from the Time Traveller. The passage continues:

I might seem some old-world savage animal, only the more dreadful and disgusting for our common likeness—a foul creature to be incontinently slain (Wells 24).

At once, the norm is turned on its head. When what had once been abnormal has been normalised, the previous norm, instead, takes its place as deviant. Parrinder, like me, observes that the Time Traveller feels detached from his own kind – the humans of the future – to the extent where he sees himself as an animal in comparison (49). In a similar spirit, Karschay writes, Victorian degeneration discourse eventually reached a peak in its defining of deviant symptoms. Inevitably, the span for what was ‘normal’ shrank to the extent that being degenerate was more common than not (3).

Degeneration

Moving on, I now turn to the different aspects of *The Time Machine* that reflect upon Victorian degeneration discourse. According to Barnett, Wells saw degeneration as a motivator for social action, and the popularity of degeneration as a topic in late 19th century England is evident in the novella (205). Pick even identifies Wells’ text as “an exemplary

‘blue-print’ of degenerationist concerns” (157). This section will explore degeneration in the novella in three steps. The first two concern Morlocks, who are very much a product of their time. In these parts, Morlocks’ “natural” environment, habits, and behaviour, as well as descriptions of purely physical traits, will be connected to late-Victorian ideas about degeneration. Finally, this section will deal with Elois and the decay of human intellect, culture, and civilisation.

Like many workers and poor in Victorian London, Morlocks in *The Time Machine* are relegated to life underground. Unlike their ancestors, though, Morlocks are almost completely severed from the surface of the Earth, forever banished to life in darkness:

I had to clamber down a shaft of perhaps two hundred yards. The descent was effected by means of metallic bars projecting from the sides of the well, and these being adapted to the needs of a creature much smaller and lighter than myself [...] The thudding sound of a machine below grew louder and more oppressive. (Wells 51)

This is the Time Traveller’s recollection of his first descent into Morlock territory, and it provides a good general picture of their residence. Deep below ground, they live in complete darkness amongst extremely loud machinery. The Time Traveller’s perspective is severely limited in this case, as he is only down the shaft for a short while and his sight is restricted by the range of a lit matchstick. He identifies the Morlocks hiding in the “grotesque black shadows” of “great shapes like big machines” (Wells 52). The Time Traveller himself reflects on the conditions of his own time: “Even now, does not an East-end worker live in such artificial conditions as practically to be cut off from the natural surface of the earth?” (47).⁷ Greenslade mentions an 1883 pamphlet describing the slums of East End as characterised by repugnant odour, dangerous gases, human waste in the streets, and courts that get no fresh air, sunlight, or clean water (48). The editor of the 2017 Oxford World Classics edition of *The Time Machine*, Roger Luckhurst, adds that East Enders suffered despairing conditions, mentioning a report about “sewer hunters” that scavenged sewer tunnels for a living (Wells 112n). Perhaps they, along with the notion that degeneration was directly connected to filth, inspired the “peculiar unpleasant odour” of the Morlocks (53).

Degeneration was a “city disease”. That means urban life was thought to be a root cause of the condition. Anyone who lived in the city was at risk, but there was a clear tendency at the time to focus on the proletariat and residuum, that is, the workers and the poor unemployed of areas like London’s East End. Not only did they suffer from the severest

⁷ Bashota et al.’s article provides a discussion about the significance of technology and the Industrial Revolution in *The Time Machine*.

of urban dangers, like contaminated air and poor-quality food, but they also lived in close proximity to each other. One theory was that degeneration spread through involuntary imitation. Individuals, in their desire to belong and adapt to their environment, became degenerate through unconscious mimicking of deviant individuals around them (Arata 24). Additionally, Morel argued that degeneration, once internalised in the body, was transmittable through heredity. With time it would result in increasingly degenerate individuals, causing devolution (Karschay 13). Worries about the spread of degeneration reflect the larger fear of corruption of the individual leading to decay of the entire nation or race (Arata 6). If one considers that workers and the poor were the epitome of such decay, it is easier to see why the middle class held them at arm's length. Take it one step further, and it becomes clear why the Time Traveller is repulsed by the Morlocks.

How is degeneration reflected in the behaviour of the Morlocks? One of the big reoccurring symptoms of degeneration was criminality (Olson 279). As mentioned previously, criminality was considered both a behavioural and physical symptom and was particularly associated with the residuum (Greenslade 48). Pick writes of a perceived "criminal race": a large class residing in particular districts of society who bred among themselves until people were born criminals (Pick 183). Belonging to the residuum also implied violent tendencies and failing morals (Greenslade 48). As mentioned previously, Morel emphasised that degenerates housed a "rotteness within" themselves that was just as revealing as physical deviances (Arata 21). Considering both criminality and Morel's "rotteness within", it is evident that degeneration shows in violent, immoral, and deviating behaviour.

All these qualities are found in the Morlocks. Initially, the Time Traveller believes them to be mere servants of the Eloi. Yet, with time he realises the roles are quite reversed – worse, even: "These Eloi were mere fatted cattle, which the ant-like Morlocks preserved and preyed upon" (Wells 59). With the cannibalistic nature of Morlocks, Wells takes the idea about criminal degenerate behaviour to an entirely new level. Luckhurst claims in a footnote that Victorians considered cannibalism a most primitive activity associated with West African cults (114n). Morlocks could therefore be likened to non-European races, which further distanced them from the white English middle class.⁸ Degenerates were to some extent branded as a separate 'alien' race thought to be an enemy of Victorian civilised society (Karschay 2-3). The novella's alienation of Morlocks and othering of degenerates plays into middle-class fears about primitive humans while also reaffirming the superiority of

⁸ Bashota et al. briefly discuss Morlocks, non-European races, and racism in Victorian England (256).

the Victorian middle-class norm.

As mentioned above, degeneration was closely connected to criminality. Considered a symptom of degeneration, criminality did not only manifest itself in deviant behaviour, but also in physical manners. In one of the most influential additions to degeneration theory, Lombroso connected criminality to man's primitive past. Moreover, he claimed to identify physical proof of atavism in the anatomy of criminals, with such attributes including large eyes and jaw (Arata 33). In an 1850 pamphlet, Thomas Carlyle compared criminals to the likes of apes, dogs, wolves, and oxen – animals that were seen as diabolic in nature (Pick 194). Some traces of the descriptions of criminals can be found in Morlocks. Morlocks have two primary identifiers that the Time Traveller returns to. One is their likeness to apes, and the other is their eyes. The former is to be further explored in the section of this thesis that deals with Darwinism. For now, I will focus on the eyes.

On first encounter, the Time Traveller observes the Morlocks as having lidless “strange large greyish-red eyes” that are “luminous by reflection against the daylight without” (Wells 45, 54). The same description of the eyes is repeated numerous times throughout the novella. Not only are the eyes reminiscent of stereotypical ideas of a criminal's face, being so large, but they also fortify the dehumanisation of Morlocks, and thereby the poor slum dweller of Victorian London. The redness of their eyes is reminiscent of albino rodents, and, being grey and lidless, they are also similar to the eyes of blind fishes. Their eyes are reflective in light, much like mirrors. Parrinder suggests that the Time Traveller sees his own humanity mirrored in these futuristic beasts as he meets their gaze. He adds that humans often experience some unease when facing animals due to “preconceptions which prevent us from encountering animals on terms of equality” (59). This could, amongst other interpretative contexts, be likened to the dehumanisation of workers and poor in Victorian England.

How Morlocks differ from the normative Victorian body is also a signifier for degeneration. Above, I discussed the alienating functions of normativity in relation to the Victorian middle class othering anyone who strayed from their specific norms. Now, I will focus more directly on the deviating bodies of the Morlocks, looking at the significance of cultural context in the depiction of Wells' inhuman labour race. Tromp and Valerius write that cultural context determines physical normativity. The portrayal of Morlocks, for example, “only [comes] to mean something within a particular social and conceptual system” (Tromp and Valerius 3). When Morel described the degenerate body as especially deformed and internally anomalous, he simultaneously created an image of the normative body from which the degenerate could stray. Likewise, the physical traits that the Time Traveller finds

so strange and repulsive in the Morlocks presuppose an ideal body as contrast. As Tromp and Valerius put it, “visible difference [has] often been [a] central [feature] in the construction of freakishness” (4). The Morlocks, in short summary of all the Time Traveller’s descriptions of them, are pale white, excessively hairy, small, odorous, and practically blind. They are the opposite of the normative late-Victorian middle class. But it is important to remember that the Morlocks are only anomalous in the cultural and social context of Victorian England. Had the plot of *The Time Machine* been presented from a Morlock’s point of view, it is rather the Time Traveller who would have been the freak.

H.G. Wells refers to degeneration theory directly only once in the novella. Ironically, it is not used in reference to Morlocks, but to Eloi: “The too-perfect security of the Overworlders had led them to a slow movement of degeneration, to a general dwindling in size, strength, and intelligence” (Wells 48). That Wells chose to portray a future where not only the poor, who in Victorian England were subject to degeneration theory, but also the upper classes were degenerate, is truly thought-provoking. The Eloi provide a contrast to the Morlocks, showing a different kind of degeneration. The Time Traveller concludes that the Eloi’s position as Overworlders proves their aristocratic heritage. They were once the privileged urban upper class, whose pursuit of comfort would eventually force the working class underground forever. Whereas many sources about degeneration tend to focus fully on the lower classes, *The Time Machine* showcases how the aristocracy were also considered ill. In the novella’s futuristic scenario, the rich, as Eloi, are portrayed as frail, lazy, sexless, and unintelligent, which could be connected to fin-de-siècle decadence culture. The Time Traveller thinks them infantile, describing them as possessing the “intellectual level of one of our five-year-old children” (Wells 27). British degenerationist Ray Lankester suggested that degeneration was the outcome of less complex conditions of life (Richter 11; Jamieson 77). While he might have referred to the conditions of the working class, the same principle could be applied to the rich. Simplicity and laziness do not require a developed intellect, meaning aristocrats, enjoying the most leisurely lives of all, become degenerate on the same grounds as labourers (Richter 13). The Time Traveller remarks on such a possibility while also suggesting Lankester’s process in reverse: “Strength is the outcome of need: security sets a premium for feebleness” (Wells 32). Morlocks, therefore, might be assumed to have become more complex and less degenerate than Eloi due to their harsh living conditions, and yet, much like Eloi, they exhibit degenerate qualities, thereby disproving Lankester’s argument.

As the Time Traveller testifies, the decay of the aristocracy brought on the downfall of civilisation. Wells juxtaposes the Time Traveller’s assumption that the future would be extremely intellectually and culturally advanced with the downfall of humanity seen in *The*

Time Machine. Rather than incredible progression, he stumbles upon “the sunset of mankind” (Wells 32). Interestingly enough, he places the entirety of the blame for this outcome on the Elois, despite his bias against the Morlocks. When the Time Traveller muses on the fate of humanity, “humanity” really seems to only mean the middle-class norm:

I grieved to think how brief the dream of the human intellect had been. It had committed suicide. It had set itself steadfastly towards comfort and ease, a balanced society with security and permanency as its watchword, it had attained its hopes—to come to this at last. (Wells 73)

Indeed, the Fin de Siècle brought with it worries about the end of the intellectual world approaching (Bergonzi 4). Arata adds that Victorians felt “anxieties concerning the collapse of culture [and] the possibly fatal decay – physical, moral, spiritual, creative – of the Anglo-Saxon ‘race’ as a whole” (Arata 1). The pessimistic spirit, writes Olson, largely tied into Darwinism and the change in attitude towards scientism in the last third of the 19th century. Rather than optimistically viewing science as an opportunity to create a better world, the Victorians became more and more pessimistic. Now, science seemed to show how degeneration threatened to halt evolutionary progress, causing the decay of man (293).⁹ Below, I will proceed to explore the influence of Victorian Darwinist discourse on *The Time Machine*.

Darwinism

Darwinism, much like degeneration, is a central theme in *The Time Machine*. This section will explore man’s descent, atavism, ‘ape anxiety’, and humanity in Wells’ novella. The idea of humanity sharing its descent with other animals shook the Victorians. In *On the Origins of Species*, Darwin avoided mentioning the evolution of humankind, in case the topic would cause an uproar. Later, in 1871, he published *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex*, wherein he presented the ancestry of mankind. The response was much more dramatic than it had been to the former book (Olson 235). Suddenly, the entire image of the human race as separate from other beings crumbled. Additionally, the Victorians needed to accept their evolutionary ancestry – all the previous stages of the human species. Easier said than done, keeping in mind their tendency to abhor “savages” and anything primitive: “It may be that [the Time Traveller] swept back into the past, and fell among the blood-drinking, hairy

⁹ Barnett also notes a rising pessimism connected to degeneration theory in England in the last two decades of the 19th century (204).

savages of the Age of Unpolished Stone” (Wells 87). A common interpretation among researchers is that *The Time Machine* is a critique of the fin-de-siècle belief that humanity dominated the evolutionary ladder, with Wells cautioning readers to consider the possibilities of regression, degeneration, and the beast within to reawaken (McNabb 383, 389; Abitz 135, 141).

There is no mistaking that Morlocks exhibit qualities of humanity’s primitive stages. For example, they have “flaxen hair on [their heads] and down [their backs]” (Wells 45). By contrast, Eloi are completely smooth and hairless save for the curly hair on their heads (26). In actuality, sparse amounts of body hair go against the reasoning of natural selection, since hair protects the body and keeps it warm. Instead, Darwin argued that the lack of hair was the result of sexual attraction, stimulated by cultural beauty ideals (Olson 248). Morlocks’ hair represents humans’ savage and animalistic past, while Eloi’s lack thereof represents homo sapiens sapiens.

In *The Time Machine*, Wells presents an outcome where adaption to harsh conditions results in an evolutionary backslide (McNabb 389). This reflected the fear of regression that accompanied the coming to terms with humanity’s descent that the Victorians had to face. Atavism, denoting evolutionary regression, both fascinated and concerned the Victorians greatly. Atavism can show in both physical and psychological ways, with Mr Hyde being a famous literary example of both. Darwin himself described atavism in the mentally deficient, claiming them to have smaller than average brains, excessive body hair, short attention spans, poor hygiene, bad manners, and an unusual desire to climb things (Richter 10-11). Richter observes that Darwin’s checklist described characteristics often ascribed to lower classes, savages, primitive humans, animals, or infants (10-11). The Morlocks, put next to Darwin’s list, are covered in hair, have a bad smell, and clamber on walls (Wells 45). Furthermore, Eloi’s and Morlock’s unfamiliarity with fire connects them to the likes of ancient cave men. Mastering fire is one of civilised man’s greatest feats but is lost to its future generations. The Time Traveller’s ability to entertain the Eloi and frighten the Morlocks with his matches suggests an evolutionary reversal in humanity. Additionally, according to Parrinder, cannibalism – the Morlocks’ diet – indicated zoological retrogression in some of Wells’ works, including *The Time Machine* (58). Morlocks are described as “less human and more remote than our cannibal ancestors of three or four thousand years ago”, and it could perhaps be argued that Morlocks and Eloi are no longer the same species (Wells 59). Contrarily, because the Time Traveller refers to both as races, I argue that Eloi and Morlocks belong to different races within the same human species. This, of course, heavily implies racist ideas, where Eloi can be interpreted as representing white Europeans and

Morlocks as non-white persons portrayed as dangerous and cannibalistic. All in all, Morlocks and Elois present a dark prophecy of deterioration and regression of humanity.

Perhaps more frightening than the idea of humanity's primitive past was its genetic connections to animals, especially to our closest relatives, the apes, which gave rise to 'ape anxiety'. It illustrates not only horror at the evolutionary relationship between man and animal, but also the immense fear of conjunction (Richter 14). Indeed, that is what the Time Traveller encounters in the future. He observes the Morlocks initially as "queer little ape-like [figures]" (Wells 45). His tone is less grim than expected, perhaps because he had yet to make the evolutionary connection between Morlocks and humans. The likeness of Morlocks and animals does not stop at apes, though. Continually, as the Time Traveller grows more and more hateful of the Morlocks, 'ape anxiety' is displayed in countless animal comparisons. Some are less remarkable, like their feet resembling those of a sloth (38). But they get increasingly worse. In the scene where the Time Traveller is ambushed by Morlocks in the burning forest, the Morlocks behave like rats, being "new vermin that replaced the old" (70, 50). The Time Traveller thinks them reminiscent of white lemurs – an animal that represented both spirits of death and nocturnal mammals (46, 50, 111n). Sometimes they are insect-like, as the Time Traveller describes their underground tunnel system as an anthill (57). Their pallid skin and reflective blind eyes earn them resemblance to worms, cave fish, and cats (46-47, 50).

At first, the Time Traveller portrays the Morlocks as humanlike, even considering their animal traits. With time, he insists fervently upon their inhumanity. The contrast between Morlock's lingering humanity and lack thereof is best expressed in this quote: "I saw a small, white moving creature, with large bright eyes which regarded me steadfastly as it retreated. It made me shudder. It was so like a human spider!" (Wells 45). The description is extremely uncanny. Meanwhile, the Time Traveller's struggle with accepting Morlocks as the evolutionary progression of man mirrors the Victorian anxiety on the same topic. Symbolically, the Time Traveller is at one point overpowered by Morlocks as if "in a monstrous spider's web" (70). This could be read as humanity being hopelessly swallowed up by Darwinism, and the grim prospects of its descent and future.

Darwinism prompted debates about the evolutionary consequences of contemporary life, such as social conditions and natural selection. How would the race progress if things continued as they were? Wells himself believed people should not be so concerned with what humans *used to* be, but rather about what they *would become* (Bergonzi 36). With a background of studying science at university in the mid-1880s, Wells was greatly influenced by Malthus, Darwin, and Huxley (Hale 265-266). As stated previously, the second

half of the 19th century saw an increasingly pessimistic view of scientism. Huxley, who taught Wells in his first year of university, was one of the most influential and pessimistic Darwinists of the 19th century. Huxley saw nature as merciless, arguing that human “evolution had depended upon individualism and competition” (Hale 20). Society, with its ethics and socialism, existed in opposition to nature. Nature, the enemy of society, was a dark presence remaining in every individual (Hale 20, 208). Malthus, whose ideas Darwinism is partly based upon, reasoned that as the human population continues to grow, the unchanging amount of Earth’s resources will cease to be able to sustain all of humanity. Consequently, the weak will die of starvation or other causes of resource shortages, while the strong survive (Olson 232).

Evolution does not guarantee progress. It might just as well lead to downfall. Essentially, Darwin claimed that if an organism is the subject of slight hereditary change, the organism is left with either an advantage or a disadvantage. If it is at a disadvantage, it will die and not pass on its genetics. If, however, the change gives it an advantage, it will survive and reproduce. Many slight changes over time will separate the divergent organisms into a new species (Olson 233). Arata builds on this idea, writing that poor conditions of urban Victorian society would force its population to adapt in a negative manner (Arata 25). In *The Time Machine*, the urban proletariat and residuum were left no choice but to adapt to their surroundings: “the earth must be tunnelled enormously, and these tunnelling were the habitat of the New Race” (Wells 47). As Olson highlights, industrialization, and with it “the emphasis on competition for wealth”, amplified the risks of mental illness and degeneration by creating a selfish endeavour for success in individuals (Olson 242). This relates to Huxley’s pessimism about humanity abandoning socialism for natural selfish desires.

To take it a step further, I return to Lankester’s argument that degeneration was the evolutionary outcome of less complex life conditions, especially for the poor, as the entire British population achieved easier access to food and wealth (Richter 13). Contrarily, as stated above, this argument is only applicable to Eloi, whose degeneracy is the product of an easy and lazy lifestyle. Morlocks, to contrast, were starved by the rich as supplies ran short – in Malthusian fashion – and had to resort to eating “rats and such-like vermin” before turning cannibalistic (Wells 59). In that way, *The Time Machine* has a theme of “you are what you eat”. The Morlocks go from eating rats to, in the Time Traveller’s words, to some extent replacing rats. The Eloi, once the upper class with meat on their plates, become livestock themselves (59).

Why is the future presented in *The Time Machine* so frightening to the Time Traveller? For one, Wells presents a race that has lost its humanity. Olson writes that *The*

Descent of Man awakened the attitude that “sympathy and selflessness [were] the principle defining characteristics of advanced humanity and the prerequisites for all human progress” (241). Darwin noticed that social animals develop social instincts, the most important one being sympathy. A sympathetic individual would risk their life for a member of their group or share their food even in dire times. Altruistic acts of sympathy are “moral” (239). *The Time Machine* shows a dichotomy between the Eloi’s lives in Utopia and the Morlocks’ lives in Dystopia that Bergonzi likens to the fine line between human nature, characterised by socialism and good morals, and the primitive unconscious that threatens to ruin humankind (Bergonzi 20). When the rich abandoned sympathy for their fellow worker humans, the entire race deteriorated and split into two. Consequently, the Morlocks were forced to abandon their morals to survive. Wells’ vision therefore disputes Darwin’s prediction that humanity, as a social and moral race, would come to exterminate all savage species within a few centuries (Olson 240).

Parrinder suggests that Wells, with his education in prehistoric evolution, thought that travelling to the year 802,701 would be enough to see the degenerate products of natural selection (38-39). As shown above, Morlocks and Eloi alike display degenerate characteristics, with the Morlocks portrayed as especially inhuman and mentally deranged, as proved by their lack of morals. Karschay writes that the French degenerationist Morel described degeneracy and mental derangement as hereditary traits (13). This, Olson argues, suggested that humanity could develop reversion from sympathy and morals, which threatened a devolution of humanity (240). Morel thought insanity and degeneration to be incurable conditions, urging for preventative measures to hinder affected individuals from reproducing and spreading their disease (279). Considering Morel’s ideas, Morlocks were a nightmare scenario for Victorian readers. They can be interpreted as the devolved product of degeneration amplified through countless generations of the poorer classes. In general, late Victorians had what Richter calls “anthropological anxieties” about devolution causing the fall of civilisation (Richter 9). It is unsurprising, then, that eugenics became a topic of discussion in the late 19th century, following Darwin’s cousin Francis Galton’s coining of the word (Olson 290). Through eugenics, the Victorians wished to improve their race, in likeness to what the Time Traveller expects to find in the future: “The whole world will be intelligent, educated, and co-operating” (Wells 33).

Conclusion

The purpose of this thesis has been to analyse H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine* in relation to Victorian fin-de-siècle discourses and anxieties about class, degeneration, and Darwinism. This was done by putting depictions of the Time Traveller, Morlocks, and Elois into the cultural context of late 19th-century Britain. First, the thesis showed how the Time Traveller, as an Intellectual Observer, has an impact on how degeneration is discussed in *The Time Machine*. Symptoms of degeneration were at many times similar to characteristics of the working class and the residuum, and were thusly used by the middle class to “other” these groups. They also applied degeneration to aristocrats, though not to quite the same extent. Secondly, this thesis analysed degeneration in relation to Morlocks and Elois, connecting their physical and moral traits to symptoms of degeneration. The results show that Morlocks physically resemble 19th-century descriptions of degenerate criminals, while also displaying an inward moral rottenness that was central to the supposed disease. Simultaneously, Elois display degeneracy in their low intellect. Finally, this thesis looked at Darwinism in *The Time Machine*. Wells demonstrates fin-de-siècle fears about evolution by attributing to the Morlocks animalistic and primitive traits like excessive hair growth, bestial bodies, and cannibalism. Wells' pessimistic presentation of the future also illustrates why some Victorians urged eugenic measures to ensure a purification of the human race. To conclude, the exploration of these three topics has been extensive in this paper. Still, there is much left to uncover. For example, future research should consider *The Time Machine* in a biographical context, considering H.G. Wells' class, political stance, and role in 19th-century racial discourse. I also urge for a deeper exploration of eugenics and racism in relation to degeneration theory and Darwinism, and how this is reflected in *The Time Machine* – topics this paper could not include due to its limited scope.

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