

# THE TIME MACHINE

by H.G. Wells



## THE AUTHOR

Herbert George Wells (1866-1946) was born into a poor family outside London; his father was a shopkeeper and professional cricketer and his mother a housekeeper. He worked hard to gain an education at the University of London, where he studied under T.H. Huxley, one of the earlier supporters of Darwinism, and where he graduated with a Zoology degree in 1888. For the next five years, he taught science, then turned to journalism and the writing of science fiction. The publication of his first story, *The Time Machine*, in 1895 made his reputation, despite the fact that he was strongly criticized by Jules Verne for the speculative and romantic aspects of the narrative. He wrote more than 150 books, including *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896), *The Invisible Man* (1897), and *The War of the Worlds* (1898). In 1903 he joined the Fabian Society, a group of British socialists who believed that social change could come peacefully by democratic means, but who also favored social engineering, including eugenics and selective breeding, in order to achieve the optimum social conditions.

## PLOT SUMMARY

The story, narrated by one of the guests, begins in the home of the Time Traveller. He is hosting a dinner party for a group of his friends, all of whom are professional men. He speaks to them of the fourth dimension and the possibility of time travel. He then brings out a model, puts it on a table, and activates it. The model suddenly disappears, and the Time Traveller tells the others that it has gone into the future. He then takes them into his laboratory, where a full-sized version of the Time Machine is almost completed. Despite their skepticism, the men agree to meet again the following week.

When the men arrive the next week, there is no sign of the Time Traveller. Halfway through dinner he appears, looking bedraggled and wounded. After dressing for dinner and eating some food to help regain his strength, he begins to tell his story. After spending most of the last week making last-minute repairs and adjustments on the Time Machine, he had left that very morning. He describes his feelings while traveling through time and his fear that he might stop in some place where the location of the Machine is already occupied by something else. Finally, he stops so quickly that the Time Machine tips over. He finds himself in a lovely landscape, full

of grasses and flowers, with a large white sphinx, ancient carvings and beautiful but decrepit buildings scattered around. After righting the Time Machine, he encounters the inhabitants of the land - small, delicate people about four feet tall. They dressed in bright clothing and ate only fruit. Despite their beauty, he soon finds them to be ignorant of the most rudimentary information. In fact, they are like children, joyfully curious about him for a time, but soon losing interest. He finds it almost impossible to get any useful information out of them.

By looking at the dial on the Time Machine, he discovers that he has arrived at the year 802,701 AD. He spends some time exploring the area and finds that no individual homes seem to exist. He begins to draw conclusions about the evolution of human society - that the end of war has also meant the end of competition, thus the end of gender roles and the end of the family, along with little impetus to produce children. With no conflict, society had gone to seed and was on the wane. When he returns from his walk, he discovers that the Time Machine is gone. He looks frantically for it, frightening the little people in the process, then falls into an exhausted sleep. When he wakes up, he discovers tracks on the grass outside the sphinx and concludes that the machine had been taken inside the hollow pedestal on which the statue rested. He tries to ask the little people about the pedestal, but they are horrified and insulted that he would mention such a thing. Realizing that he can do nothing at the moment, he decides to learn as much as he can about the world in which he now seems trapped. In his travels he discovers a series of deep circular wells from which emanate a machine-like sound and which are apparently designed for the intake of air; he initially thinks they are part of a sanitary mechanism. He also sees no signs of cemeteries or crematoria, then notices that not one of the little people is of an advanced age, nor is any sick or infirm. The people do not work, yet their clothing and food must be provided for somehow. The Time Traveller begins to doubt his original theory of a decadent civilization.

One day the Time Traveller sees a young woman bathing in the river; she gets a cramp and, in the process of drowning, cries out. No one makes a move to save her, but the Time Traveller easily does so. That afternoon, the woman, whose name is Weena, brings a garland of flowers and the two begin a tentative friendship. After that, she follows him everywhere and cries when he tries to leave her. He also discovers that she is terrified of the dark, as are all the little people, who are never outside at night and always sleep together in large groups in the large buildings. Several times before dawn the Time Traveller gets a brief glimpse of white, apelike creatures running near the sphinx, in one case carrying what looks like a body. One day he encounters one of the white creatures in the shadows among the ruins and pursues him until he sees him go down one of the wells into the dark caverns below. He begins to suspect that the nocturnal creatures are also man's descendants; that, in fact, man has evolved into two distinct species, the one beautiful and effete and the other ugly, subterranean, and laboring in industry. He concludes that the Haves and Have-nots - present day Capitalists and Laborers - had eventually evolved into the two distinct species he observed, the Eloi and the Morlocks. His theory that the Eloi were the masters and the Morlocks were the slaves didn't fit the facts, however. Why should the Eloi be afraid of the dark, and why couldn't they get his Time Machine back? Now believing that the Morlocks had taken the Time Machine, he questions Weena, who refuses to answer and finally bursts into tears.

Two days later the Time Traveller determines to descend the shaft of one of the wells - despite the vehement objections and tears of Weena. The descent is more than 200 yards, and when his arms and legs cramp up he rests in a tunnel apparently designed for that purpose, and falls asleep. When he wakes, he finds three Morlocks pawing at him, but frightens them off by

lighting a match. He goes down the tunnel and emerges in a huge cavern, where great machines throb. He also sees there a table containing the remains of a meal; the red bones indicate that the Morlocks are carnivorous, but he can't imagine what they eat. After his next match burns out the Morlocks surround him and begin to touch him all over. He lights another match and flees to the tunnel, but again the Morlocks pursue him. He eludes their grasp and reaches the shaft, clambering up as fast as he can. When he reaches the top he passes out in the arms of the frightened Weena, who had been waiting for him the whole time.

At this point the Time Traveller begins to understand the significance of the approaching New Moon - since the Morlocks only came out under cover of darkness, the Eloi were in greatest danger when the darkness was deepest and lasted for the greatest amount of time. The next day he determines to investigate a huge building he had seen in the distance, something he refers to as the Palace of Green Porcelain. He takes Weena with him, carrying her most of the way. She is delighted, and often stops to pick flowers, which she crams into his pockets (at this point the Time Traveller interrupts his narrative to take two of the flowers, now crushed but still recognizable, out of his pocket and place them before his listeners). By sunset they approach a dark wood - surely a dangerous place to enter at night. The Time Traveller stops to let Weena get some sleep, but he remains awake to keep vigil against the Morlocks. The clear night provides plenty of starlight and a late-rising moon, and no Morlocks approach. As he thinks through the night, he suddenly realizes the true nature of the bloody meat he saw on the table in the Morlocks' cavern - the Morlocks had become cannibals, and were raising, feeding, and providing for the Eloi as they would cattle, only to devour them when the need arose.

Hoping to find a safe place to hide from the Morlocks in the Palace of Green Porcelain, the Time Traveller discovers that it once was a museum of some kind. He finds a wide variety of specimens of all sorts, most badly deteriorated, but he is delighted to find in the chemistry section a functional box of matches and some camphor - great treasures when the Morlocks are afraid of fire. The Time Traveller is fascinated and spends most of the day in the building, but near nightfall they go down one particularly dark passage and find Morlocks emerging from the other end. They flee the museum, but night is falling. They approach the woods and sense the Morlocks all around them. They enter the woods and the Time Traveller builds a fire, hoping to keep the Morlocks from following them. As they advance further into the woods, he discovers that the Morlocks are all around them again, so he builds another fire and he and Weena try to sleep. Not having slept for more than 24 hours, the Time Traveller sleeps soundly - so soundly that when he awakes, he feels Morlock hands on his body. He discovers that the fire has gone out and Weena is missing. He tries to fight off the Morlocks, but then he sees in the distance that the first fire he had set had ignited the entire wood and was now a blazing conflagration. He flees away from the encroaching flame while the blinded and terrified Morlocks run into trees, each other, and finally into the flames. Weena is nowhere to be found, though he returns to the scene the next morning to search for her. He concludes that she perished in the flames, and reasons that such a death would certainly be better than the death that otherwise awaited her.

The following day he returns to his original landing place and, to his amazement, discovers that the doors of the pedestal under the sphinx are open. He rushes into the hollow pedestal and finds the Time Machine pulled over into one corner. He is astounded to find that the curious and mechanically-minded Morlocks had even oiled the mechanisms. As he begins to mount the machine, the doors slam closed and he is surrounded by Morlocks. He fights them off, inserts the levers needed to work the Time Machine (he had removed them on arrival so no one would inadvertently take it on a time journey), and distances himself from the Morlock menace.

He then decides to go thirty million years into the future to discover the ultimate fate of the human race. He finds that the sun becomes ever brighter as earth collapses inward in its orbit and that more and more primitive life forms are all that remain - huge butterflies and crabs, lichen, and some unidentified black creature. Finally, there is no life at all on earth. The Time Traveller then returns to his own time, arriving just after his dinner party had been scheduled to begin, albeit in a somewhat bedraggled condition. After changing for dinner, he tells his story, which has just been recorded by the Narrator. No one appears to believe him despite the existence of the flowers and the somewhat worse-for-wear condition of the Time Machine itself (it had been moved to the other side of the laboratory - precisely the distance from his landing place in the future to the inside of the pedestal of the sphinx), to say nothing of the scars the Time Traveller had received from his adventures in the future. A few days later, the Narrator returns and finds the Time Traveller and his Time Machine gone. They never returned.

## **MAJOR CHARACTERS**

- Time Traveller - A scientist who invents a machine that allows him to travel through time; he uses it to travel to the world of the year 802,701 AD.
- Hillyer - The narrator is a friend of the Time Traveller who was a guest at the two dinner parties in the story and recounts the events contained therein.
- The Eloi - An effete tribe of delicate and debased aristocrats who are raised for food by the Morlocks.
- The Morlocks - An apelike tribe of subterranean factory workers who cannot tolerate light and feed on the Eloi.
- Weena - An Eloi girl saved from drowning by the Time Traveller. She becomes his friend during his time in the future, but dies in a forest fire.

## **NOTABLE QUOTATIONS**

“There are really four dimensions, three which we call the three planes of Space, and a fourth, Time. There is, however, a tendency to draw an unreal distinction between the former three and the latter, because it happens that our consciousness moves intermittently in one direction along the latter from the beginning to the end of our lives.” (Time Traveller, ch.1, p.3)

“What might appear when that hazy curtain was altogether withdrawn? 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? 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.” (Time Traveller, ch.3, p.27)

“You may hardly understand how it took me. You see I had always anticipated that the people of the year Eight Hundred and Two Thousand odd would be incredibly in front of us in knowledge, art, everything.... A flow of disappointment rushed across my mind. For a moment I felt that I had built the Time Machine in vain.” (Time Traveller, ch.4, p.31)

“A queer thing I soon discovered about my little hosts, and that was their lack of interest. They would come to me with eager cries of astonishment, like children, but, like children, they would soon stop examining me, and wander away after some other toy.” (Time Traveller, ch.4, p.35)

“Seeing the ease and security in which these people were living, I felt that this close resemblance of the sexes was after all what one would expect; for the strength of a man and the softness of a woman, the institution of the family, and the differentiation of occupations are mere militant necessities of an age of physical force. Where population is balanced and abundant, much child-bearing becomes an evil rather than a blessing to the State: where violence comes but rarely and offspring are secure, there is less necessity - indeed there is no necessity for an efficient family, and the specialization of the sexes with reference to their children’s needs disappears. We see some beginnings of this even in our own time, and in this future age it was complete.” (Time Traveller, ch.4, p.38)

“For the first time I began to realize an odd consequence of the social effort in which we are at present engaged. And yet, come to think, it is a logical consequence enough. Strength is the outcome of need: security sets a premium on feebleness. The work of ameliorating the conditions of life - the true civilising process that makes life more and more secure - had gone steadily on to a climax.... And the harvest was what I saw!” (Time Traveller, ch.4, p.39-40)

“The whole world will be intelligent, educated, and co-operating; things will move faster and faster towards the subjugation of Nature. In the end, wisely and carefully we shall readjust the balance of animal and vegetable life to suit our human needs.” (Time Traveller, ch.4, p.40)

“But with this change in condition comes inevitably adaptations to the change. What, unless biological science is a mass of errors, is the cause of human intelligence and vigour? Hardship and freedom: conditions under which the active, strong, and subtle survive and the weaker go to the wall; conditions that put a premium upon the loyal alliance of capable men, upon self-restraint, patience, and decision. And the institution of the family, and the emotions that arise therein, the fierce jealousy, the tenderness for offspring, parental self-devotion, all found their justification and support in the imminent dangers of the young. *Now*, where are those imminent dangers? There is a sentiment arising, and it will grow, against connubial jealousy, against fierce maternity, against passion of all sorts; unnecessary things now, and things that make us uncomfortable, savage survivals, discords in a refined and pleasant life.” (Time Traveller, ch.4, p.41-42)

“This has ever been the fate of energy in security; it takes to art and to eroticism, and then come languor and decay.” (Time Traveller, ch.4, p.43)

“At first, proceeding from the problems of our own age, it seemed clear as daylight to me that the gradual widening of the present merely temporary and social difference between the Capitalist and the Labourer, was the key to the whole position.” (Time Traveller, ch.5, p.64)

“But, clearly, the old order was already in part reversed. The Nemesis of the delicate ones was creeping on apace. Ages ago, thousands of generations ago, man had thrust his brother man out of the ease and the sunshine. And now that brother was coming back - changed! Already the Eloi had begun to learn the old lesson anew: they were becoming re-acquainted with Fear.” (Time Traveller, ch.7, p.77)

“Then I tried to preserve myself from the horror that was coming upon me, by regarding it as a rigorous punishment of human selfishness. Man had been content to live in ease and delight upon the labours of his fellow-man, had taken Necessity as his watchword and excuse, and in the fulness of time Necessity had come home to him. I even tried a Carlyle-like scorn of this wretched aristocracy in decay. But this attitude of mind was impossible. However great their intellectual degradation, the Eloi had kept too much of the human form not to claim my sympathy, and to make me perforce a sharer in their degradation and their Fear.” (Time Traveller, ch.7, p.84)

“I understood now what all the beauty of the Overworld people covered. Very pleasant was their day, as pleasant as the day of the cattle in the field. Like the cattle, they knew of no enemies, and provided against no needs. And their end was the same.” (Time Traveller, ch.10, p.104)

“What a pity you’re not a writer of stories!” (Editor to the Time Traveller, ch.12, p.117)

“I, for my own part, cannot think that these latter days of weak experiment, fragmentary theory, and mutual discord are indeed man’s culminating time! I say, for my own part. He, I know - for the question had been discussed among us long before the Time Machine was made - thought but cheerlessly of the Advancement of Mankind, and saw in the growing pile of civilisation only a foolish heaping that must inevitably fall back upon and destroy its makers in the end. If that is so, it remains for us to live as though it were not so. But to me the future is still black and blank - is a vast ignorance, lit at a few casual places by the memory of his story. And I have by me, for my comfort, two strange white flowers - shrivelled now, and brown and flat and brittle - to witness that even when mind and strength had gone, gratitude and a mutual tenderness still lived in the heart of man.” (Narrator, Epilogue, p.123)

## ESSAY QUESTIONS

Discuss the following in a five-paragraph essay:

1. What is the function of the frame story in H.G. Wells’ *The Time Machine*? Why does the author choose to use an external narrator in the opening and closing chapters rather than simply allow the Time Traveller to tell the whole story in the first person? Compare and contrast this literary strategy with the similar techniques used in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* or Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*.

2. H.G. Wells was a member of England's Fabian Society, a group of socialists who believed that social change could be brought about peacefully through democratic processes. How is his Fabian socialism reflected in *The Time Machine*? How do the changing interpretations of the society the Time Traveller observes support Wells' understanding of social change?
3. H.G. Wells in his youth studied under T.H. Huxley, known as "Darwin's Bulldog" for his fierce support of evolutionary theory. How does the theory of evolution play a fundamental role in H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine*? What does he believe about the nature and direction of human evolution? Be sure to consider the roles of conflict and entropy as well as Wells' obvious belief that human beings are evolving. Support your conclusions with details from the novel.
4. Over the years, many have seen contradictions between the Theory of Evolution and the Second Law of Thermodynamics (entropy). In H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine*, the author seems to espouse both. How does he resolve the inherent contradictions between the two? Which, in the end, wins out? To what extent, then, may Wells really be said to be a Darwinian?
5. Albert Einstein introduced his theory of relativity in a paper in 1905, ten years after the publication of H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine*. In what ways does Wells anticipate Einstein's theory? In what ways does that theory add credibility to Wells' fantasy? Be specific.
6. The late nineteenth century was a time of almost universal belief in the inevitability of human progress. In what way is H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine* a critique of this belief? On what basis does Wells challenge contemporary orthodoxy? What is his view of human history? Support your points with specifics from the novel.
7. To what extent is H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine* a critique of communism? Use specific quotations from the novel to show what Wells thought of Marx's theories, remembering that he was writing more than twenty years before the Bolshevik Revolution.
8. To what extent is H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine* a critique of capitalism? What aspects of capitalism does Wells see as particularly dangerous? Why? Do you agree with him?
9. To what extent is H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine* a critique of the Industrial Revolution? Focus attention on the two races of man in the distant future as you detail the author's concerns with late nineteenth-century industrialism.
10. Thirty-seven years after the publication of H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine*, Aldous Huxley, grandson of T.H. Huxley, wrote *Brave New World*. Compare and contrast these two science-fiction dystopian fantasies. To what extent do Wells and Huxley share the same views of society? of science? Use your knowledge of the history of the era to explain the differences you find.

11. Compare and contrast H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine* and George Bernard Shaw's *Major Barbara*, written ten years later. Both men were members of the Fabian Society, a group of British socialists. To what extent do their social visions coincide? Which has the more optimistic view of future British society? Support your conclusions with details from the two books.
12. Discuss the roles played by the Eloi and the Morlocks in the social criticism of H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine*. What does each group represent? What cautionary messages are intended to be understood from learning about each group?
13. Few characters in H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine* have names. Why do you think the author makes this choice? Discuss the literary consequences of leaving most of his characters basically unknown to the reader.
14. Evaluate from Scripture the view of human history portrayed in H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine*. How would you respond to someone who expressed the idea that Wells' story portrays the future of the human race? What ideas and beliefs underlie Wells' conclusions?
15. Evaluate the ending of H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine*. What is the significance of the fact that the Time Traveller takes off once again after his adventure? What is the significance of the fact that he never comes back? Connect your answers to the overall messages of the story.
16. Fantasy stories, like stage plays, require a "willing suspension of disbelief" on the part of the reader. Describe why this is so with regard to H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine*. Be sure to use specific examples from the story to support your conclusions.
17. Discuss the Time Traveller's reaction to the Eloi in H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine*. Why does he dislike them? In what ways do they go against his expectations for the future of mankind? How does he explain the discrepancies?
18. Discuss the Time Traveller's reaction to the Morlocks in H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine*. Why does he dislike them? In what ways do they go against his expectations for the future of mankind? How does he explain the discrepancies?
19. H.G. Wells tells the story of meeting Franklin D. Roosevelt at the White House. The President, speaking of *The Time Machine*, said, "Suppose, after all, that should prove to be right, and it all ends with your butterflies and Morlocks. That doesn't matter now. The effort's real. It's worth going on with. It's worth it. It's worth it, even so." The Narrator at the end of the book leaves the reader with a similar conclusion. On what basis does Wells seek to provide hope? Would Roosevelt have agreed? Do you? Why or why not?

20. Evaluate the Time Traveller in H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine* as a man of science. To what extent does he show the characteristics of a good scientist as he tells his story? as he lives through his adventures? Point out ways in which he is not very scientific as well as ways in which he is.
21. Assess the effectiveness of the social criticism found in H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine*. To what extent does the power of the story depend on the social stratification found in late-nineteenth-century Britain? Is the criticism as effective when read by an early twenty-first-century American? Why or why not? Use details from the story to support your arguments.
22. In the old *Star Trek* series, the crew of the *Enterprise* was supposed to follow the Prime Directive, which required them not to interfere with the societies they encountered. Consider the application of this principle to the Time Traveller in H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine*. Could he have followed the Prime Directive? Would he have been better off had he done so? What about the world he visited? Use details from the story to support your answer.
23. H.G. Wells, as a Fabian socialist, was supposed to be a friend of the common laborer, yet in *The Time Machine*, the Time Traveller winds up sympathizing more with the Eloi than with the Morlocks. How would you explain this apparent contradiction? What does it tell you about Wells? about the seriousness of his socialism?
24. Consider the speculations made by the Time Traveller when he first meets the Eloi in H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine*. Pay special attention to his comments about the role of the family and the role of conflict in society. What do these speculations tell you about the worldview of the Time Traveller (and, by extension, the author)? Evaluate these ideas biblically. Be sure to cite specific quotations, both from the novel and from Scripture.
25. Discuss the importance of Weena in H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine*. In what ways is her character central to the themes the author is seeking to develop? Why would these themes not have been communicated as clearly had the Time Traveller not made this friend in the future?
26. In H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine*, the Time Traveller uses controlling images to describe the two civilizations he encounters, likening the Eloi to children and the Morlocks to apes. To what extent are the salient characteristics of the two races the result of their relationship to one another? To what extent are these characteristics the natural outcome of the author's views on biological and social evolution?
27. Discuss the significance of the Palace of Green Porcelain in H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine*. How does the Time Traveller's visit to this dilapidated museum illustrate his understanding of history, science, literature, and the importance of each?

28. Time travel stories often focus on the hazards of changing the past, but one rarely notes concern about changing the future; in fact, time travelers often desire to do so. In H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine*, note that the Time Traveller could have used the Time Machine to save Weena had he chosen to do so; like Bill Murray in *Groundhog Day*, he could have kept trying the same series of events over and over again until he got things right. Why does he not take this obvious step?
29. H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine* is a story about science and changing society, yet the final conclusion involves neither of these things, but focuses on something that does not change. What does this conclusion tell you about Wells' understanding of human nature? about the limitations, both of science and of human evolution? Is this ending unexpected, or does the author prepare the reader for it through foreshadowing throughout the story? Use specifics to support your conclusions.
30. What do you think happened to the Time Traveller at the end of H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine*? Why do you think so? Don't just speculate - back up your conclusions with indicators found throughout the novel.
31. Imagine that the Time Traveller in H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine* had landed in the early part of the twenty-first century instead of in the year 802,701. Using what the novel indicates about his own philosophy of history and understanding of human society, discuss how he would evaluate what he saw around him. Be sure to use quotations from the novel as well as specific examples from contemporary society, and remember that he would have landed in suburban London.
32. Compare and contrast H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine* with the film version of the story made in 1960. While the movie is in many ways faithful to the basic plot of the novel, some significant changes are made. How do these changes impact the major themes of the story? What issues were being addressed by the filmmakers that differed from those that concerned Wells? In what ways were these concerns a product of the time in which the film was made?
33. Virginia Woolf, in her criticism of H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine*, called Wells a "materialist," meaning that "[he] write[s] of unimportant things.... [he] spend[s] immense skill and immense industry making the trivial and the transitory appear the true and the enduring." How would you respond to Woolf's criticism? Do you agree or disagree? If you agree, what trivialities does Wells make true and enduring? If you disagree, why are his focal points rightly considered true and enduring aspects of human society?
34. H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine* makes little or no reference to religion, yet the novel by its very nature deals with important themes that touch on the matter. How would you assess the religious perspective of the author? Support your assessment with specific incidents and quotations from the novel.