The Fear of the Fall: Degeneration and Social Inequality in the Frame Narrative of H. G. Wells’s *The Time Machine*
Abstract

H. G Wells’s novel *The Time Machine* is a significant work of science fiction that dramatizes the themes of degeneration and social inequality, themes that were very relevant during the Victorian era in relation to the discovery of evolution. Degeneration was seen as the degradation of society into primitiveness far from the Victorian standards, and the problem of social difference, where the gap between poor and rich was very wide, became the visible proof of the difference between the evolved and civilized and the degenerated and primitive. The purpose of this essay is to analyse how the frame narrative, the story surrounding the main adventure, affects the theme of degeneration in the novel. The framework reveals the reactions of the people present at the dinner parties, where the Time Traveller recounts his journey into a degenerated future. The guests are all representing different factions of Victorian society, such as the Provincial Mayor, the Very Young Man and the Editor who all have their own motives and agendas in relation to degeneration, social differences and time travel. By examining the guests’ individual motives, the essay argues that they do not want to believe in time travel since it would include believing in a degenerated future where all the glory of their present-day Victorian era would crumble into chaos and pandemonium. This essay shows that by denying the relevance of the Time Traveller’s story, despite the evidence presented, the dinner guests are condemning themselves to the degenerated future they are afraid of, hence making the novel a warning example of not accepting new ideas.

**Keywords:** Degeneration; time travel; H.G. Wells; frame narrative; social difference; *The Time Machine*; Victorian society
H. G. Wells’s *The Time Machine* is a legend within science fiction and has been written and theorized about since its publication in 1895. The novel, like many other texts during the Victorian era, for example *Doctor Jekyll and Mr Hyde* by Robert Louis Stevenson and *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad, focuses on the undiscovered intricacies of mankind; specifically, where the line between civilized human and primitive beast was drawn. *The Time Machine* explores the themes through a journey into the future. The Time Traveller invites a few specific guests over for dinner where he presents to them a time travelling machine, with which he travels to a degenerated future. The future world is populated by two evolved species of mankind: the vegan Eloi and the carnivorous Morlocks. The Time Traveller deducts that they are not only the descendants of humanity but also the descendants of the different social classes, where the Morlocks represent the industrious and subterranean working class and the Eloi the languid and beautiful upper class. They are in fact only exaggerations of the Victorian society, Yevgeny Zamyatin writes “the … tribes of [M]orlocks and [E]loi are, of course, the two warring classes of the modern city, extrapolated, with their typical characteristics heightened to the point of the grotesque” (189), hence cementing the connection between the Victorians and the inhabitants of year 802701. However, these old structures of Victorian England have been turned upside down and the formerly abused workers are now monitoring the aristocracy by supplying them with food and clothes, using them as “fatted cattle” and subsequently devouring them (Wells 46). When the Time Traveller returns home to Victorian England, his discovery is denied by all his guests, despite the amount of evidence shown to them. I will endeavour to explore the motives of the Time Traveller’s guests, how they relate to the Victorian concerns of degeneration and social difference, and the consequences of the guests’ subsequent decisions, thus revealing how the framework narrative affects the theme of degeneration in the novel.
The consequence of the guests’ decision of not believing becomes a criticism against the route which society, and subsequently science, was taking. If it is a conscious choice to not believe in this extraordinary machine they are also choosing to live in the same old tracks of social inequality. *The Time Machine* becomes a warning example of how we shape our own future and the necessity of taking new ideas under consideration and not disregarding them because of our own comfort or fear.

*The Time Machine’s* strong focus on the degeneration of humanity and social difference has given rise to a number of scholarly articles, such as Michael Lee Parrish’s “Reading Meat in H. G Wells” and Paul A. Cantor and Peter Hufnagel’s “The Empire of the Future: Imperialism and Modernism in H. G. Wells”. But what has been the subject of little research is the importance of the frame narrative, specifically its significance in relation to the themes of the novel. Current research has tended to focus on the irony and the non-significance of the characters present in the frame narrative; they are there to be scorned. The frame narrative introduces us to a dinner where a number of people are invited, all of them named after their professions rather than proper names, such as “The Editor”, “The Medical Man” and “The Very Young Man”, which indicates that they represent parts of society, rather than individual characters. Critics such as Bernard Bergonzi and Nicholas Ruddick argue that the party does not understand, and therefore cannot accept, the possibility of time travel. It has been said that the frame narrative, where we are introduced to the idea of time travel, exists simply to give the reader a sense of familiarity and an “every-day feeling”, to present a juxtaposition to the remarkable tale that is to come (Bergonzi 190, Vinson 55). Ruddick claims that: “Wells reserves the full measure of his scorn for those of the dinner guests, who, like the Editor, have no scientific imagination, and who consequently cannot understand that the Time Traveller has visited a future in which our descendants could not be less concerned with horse racing or election results” (341). However, the Victorian era was a time of discovery, of science and possibilities; the industrial revolution had recently taken place, full of new inventions such as the steam engine, electricity and the bicycle. These inventions would indicate that scientific imagination in Victorian society could not have been lacking and that the guests present at the dinner party should have been able to understand and accept the possibility of time travel. Thus, rather than saying that they do not believe, I say that they do not want to believe in time travel, and hence a degenerated future, which consequently means that they do not want to believe in the fall of Victorian society.
The Time Traveller’s story is a warning against the route society would be taking if it remained as it was and is reflected in the guest’s reactions in the frame narrative, thus making it an important part of the story and how the themes are regarded. The guests knew that “the Time Traveller hated to have servants waiting at dinner” (Wells 14), indicating that he was aware of social differences and disliking it. Still he partakes in the social norms, but the fact that he is the one inventing the Time Machine suggests that he can see further than his dinner guests, hence making him superior to them. However, they are influential in different areas and are therefore important as witnesses. The Time Traveller is described as “too clever to be believed” (12), he always had an air of that there was something more that he was not telling. This could of course be seen as if he was simply an untrustworthy person, but in the light of this essay’s discoveries, it would rather seem as if he was able to see more then the guests, not because he was unreliable, but because he was more open minded, hence making him superior to the others in ways of inventions and new world orders. He realises that the current society has to change to avoid the horrible future he has seen, thus he risks going back to bring back proof (70). The guests saw the Victorian society as perfect, and since they all represented the upper or upper-middle class, they were too comfortable to see the dark sides of their perfect society, hence condemning themselves to a degenerated future. If they had seen and reacted against the social differences, and been prepared to loose some of their comfort and convenience, they could avoid the degenerated world that their chosen ignorance would lead them to.

As a result of Darwin’s discovery of evolution, a fear of degeneration arose. The theory of evolution claimed that through tiny genetic mutations, life seems to adapt to the surrounding environment, constantly moving forward, evolving into new species and changing from old shapes to new ones that are more suitable to the changing surroundings. Degeneration theory meant that instead of moving to something better and more suitable, life would instead regress and fall back to previous, more primitive shapes. The Victorian scientists thought they already had proof of the existence of degeneration; Lankester, a contemporary scientist, had traced the regressive evolution of a kind of mollusk (Arata 162n5). Michael Parrish Lee argues that degeneration theory “regarded evolution as a reversible phenomenon” (250), which means that the evolved mankind always carried with them the possible seed of regression to beastliness and savagery. Since man is what society is made of, the same theory could be applied to the evolution of society; it was not until humanity
organized themselves into a society that they became civilized. Hence, degeneration theory also included that if mankind degenerated, society would also revert back to a primitive stage of chaos and primal needs; quite the opposite to Victorian standards where “the idolatry of respectability was the answer to natural waywardness” (“History of Europe”). When the Time Traveller arrives into the future he is surprised by the lack of houses; since the machine didn’t move except in time, he should have arrived in London, the biggest city on earth in the 19th century (Wells 25). He later announces: “It seemed to me I had happened upon humanity upon the wane. The ruddy sunset set me thinking of the sunset of mankind. For the first time I began to realize an odd consequence of the social effort in which we are presently engaged.” (26), thus revealing the echoes of Victorian society and their state of social inequality in the degenerated future, showing that the theme of degeneration does indeed start in the frame narrative since it is there we see the glimpses of how society was. At first the world of the future seems to have evolved according to plan, but when he later encounters the cannibalistic Morlocks he realizes that humanity instead had degenerated:

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.

(61)

By constantly making it easier for mankind, by removing all the obstacles, humanity had become lax and languid, creating, and adapting to, a world where there is no need for exertion. By living in comfort and ignoring the issues, as the guests do, striving for a world of “permanency”, where it is as it always has been, they have created their own degenerated future. At first it might seem like a utopia, a perfect world, but it only balanced there to tumble down into degeneration and primitiveness. To the Victorians degeneration was seen as something very real and the fact that it could appear in the not too distant future was a distinct possibility, and Victorian society had a lot to lose.

Apart from the previously mentioned context of social difference, there was a danger on a more global scale as well. The Victorian society was the hub of an empire where the sun never set; the British people were the heirs of the industrial revolution, in the vanguard of technological discoveries and thought accordingly that they could measure the rest of the world after their own standards. Knowledge was abundant and
with the expansion of the railways, time became less of an issue as everything got faster with the train. It was a significant change and there is no wonder that people were afraid of the rapid pace that society was changing; they had no way of finding out where this swift road would take them in the end. This can be seen in the reactions of all of the Time Traveller’s guests, a time machine is something revolutionary, almost impossible and moves with such a speed that it can not even be seen. It symbolises the fear of the speed of technology and is thus feared and denied as truth.

Another fear that was permeating Victorian society was the fear of reversed colonialism. Cantor and Hufnagel argue that becoming as primitive as the cultures they conquered was something that imperial Britain feared greatly. The Victorian era was a time of exploration and conquering, and the British Empire stretched out over about a quarter of the earth’s surface. They saw themselves as superior and far advanced, as opposed to the civilizations they encountered. They used this as an excuse and a justification for laying them under the Union Jack and converting them to British religion, language and education (Cantor and Hufnagel 230). However, degeneration would push this balance of power in the opposite direction. Imperialism was not a gentle power, and if Victorian society regressed back to these primitive stages they ran the risk of becoming the oppressed as opposed to being the oppressors. A degenerated future meant the loss of all the power that the British Empire had accumulated, and all the wealth and comfort it brought with it. The Morlocks of the Time Traveller’s tale illustrates this; they are taking their revenge on their former masters, the Eloi by controlling them, feeding them and later devouring them (Wells 46). Just as the Eloi are becoming cannibalised by their former subjects, so might the British Empire and hence Victorian society become cannibalised by their former colonies in a degenerated future.

To narrow it down even further, you could say that the danger the future brought was the danger of too much knowledge. The Victorian’s were a devout

\[ \text{The same fear can be seen today with the still rapid pace of technology. Apocalyptic movies and novels are in abundance, and the apocalypse is often due to technology; we went too far and technology turned against us ending in pandemonium and the destruction of society. Examples are } \textit{I, Robot}, \textit{The Matrix} \text{ and } \textit{Dollhouse}. \text{ The fact that the theme is so popular indicates that this fear still permeates our society.} \]
people and Christianity stated that the fall of man started when Eve, out of persuasion and curiosity, ate an apple from the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden. Since then mankind have lived through thousands of years, always trying to redeem themselves in the eyes of God. Hence the biblical tale became a moral tale designed to demonstrate the danger of too much knowledge. However, knowledge cannot be regarded as one entity; it is a massive field with different branches. The fear of knowledge could be seen as contradictory to the progress of the Victorian era, but progress was good as long as it took England in the right direction, expanding the right branches of knowledge, the ones that served a positive development. The theme of dangerous knowledge can be traced in other novels during that era; Robert Louis Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* where Dr Jekyll through science discovers the dark side of humanity, and Victor Hugo’s *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (albeit published slightly before the Victorian era) where Claude Frollo’s thirst for knowledge is described as: “He had, they said, tasted in succession all the apples of the tree of knowledge, and, whether from hunger or disgust, had ended by tasting the forbidden fruit.” (368) Both books are examples of instances where science and the hunger for knowledge led to destruction. Thus the mere theory of a time machine became dangerous, it symbolised the apple of which the Time Traveller was about to take the first bite and discover the world outside of Eden. The guests appear to prefer to be inside the Eden, in a familiar place where ignorance is bliss and life is unchanging and static.

The novel begins when the Time Traveller invites a group of friends over for dinner, to present his idea of time travel. Critics have written that the guests are there to represent the commonness (Bergonzi 190) indeed, even the dullness of society at the time (Vinson 56). However, the significance of the persons invited is important enough that they have to represent more than the mere complacency of the Victorian society. Their specific names indicate their functions as templates; thus they become the voices of society rather than individual persons. Since there are different people present with different opinions they cannot be bunched together to create one simple view; they all share an aversion towards time travel and the degenerated future it could contain, since accepting it would endanger their very existence as a Victorian society. They all have their own motives for reacting as they do, and are therefore there to represent how different factions of society would react to the idea of time travel.
The Medical Man has to be considered a man of science to some degree; Oxford English Dictionary defines medical as “Of, relating to, or designating the science or practice of medicine…”, and as he is only a generic name without individuality, it could also be said that he represents the whole of biological science. However, the Medical Man is proving to be quite reluctant to new discoveries:

‘But,’ said the Medical Man, staring hard at a coal in the fire, ‘if Time is really only a fourth dimension of Space, why is it, and why has it always been, regarded as something different?’ (Wells 7, my emphasis)

It is a scientific question; a critical approach has to be taken with all new discoveries and theories, but if he was discussing the point with true scientific interest, eye contact might have been a valid option. By not looking at the Time Traveller while asking this question, it could be seen as if he was asking as a defence-mechanism rather than as a scientific method. By referring back to previous knowledge, he does not have to fear the discovery of something new and possibly dangerous, something that might bring with it the degeneration theorized about by fellow scientists during the Victorian era. As technological discoveries became more and more advanced, it also changed the way humanity thought of itself. They could now adjust the world to their own needs, but how far could they go to exploit the world before they reached the end? Nothing goes on forever, and the Victorian era might be at the peak of progress, which made time a dangerous enemy. The next big discovery might reveal the decline of Victorian superiority.

The Medical Man is avoiding the Time Traveller’s eyes by looking at a coal burning in the fire. Its disintegration in the fire could be seen as further emphasizing the fear of the future. Just as the coal goes from flame, to embers, to cinders, thus society might crumble from its Victorian flame to a disintegrated society. This metaphor is also noticeable in the Time Traveller’s future, showing that they indeed share the same view of a degenerated future, but the Time Traveller accepts it whereas the Medical Man denies and fears it. The Time Traveller defends himself from the darkest of mankind’s regression, the Morlocks, by lighting his matches and banishing them back to their shadows. He runs out of matches at one point, but finds more in the one place that still has some resemblance to Victorian London, the Palace of Green Porcelain, thus using his enlightened past as a weapon. But the flame is only momentary and eventually darkness engulfs him and causes the loss of the thing he holds dearest in the future, the only Eloi he has befriended Weena (58). The use of
only the past does not help, not even in the degenerated future. The flames are only flickering and brief, showing how little there is left of the Victorian flame in the future.

Due to the prosperity of Victorian England, a lot of power was invested in the upper classes, and thus a similar fear of the future can be seen in the Provincial Mayor’s reaction to the Time Traveller’s tale. The Mayor was an important political figure and had great influence. However, he was not elected by the people, but appointed by the government (Ruddock), which means that he is thriving on the powerlessness of others, perhaps he would not have been chosen if there was a general election rather than an appointment of power. The Provincial Mayor seems to not want anything to do with the theory of time traveller and only pretends to understand the theory of travelling in time:

'I think so,' murmured the Provincial Mayor; and, knitting his brows, he lapsed into an introspective state, his lips moving as one who repeats mystic words. 'Yes, I think I see it now;' he said after some time, brightening in a quite transitory manner. (Wells 6)

By “knitting his brows” and “laps[ing] into an introspective state” the Provincial Mayor gives an air of understanding, acquiring features often associated with complex thinking. However, the fact that he is moving his lips “as one who repeats mystic words” does indicate that he does, in fact, not understand the concept. The word mystic creates a feeling of uncertainty; of something inexplicable that requires only belief and not understanding to exist. The Provincial Mayor does not understand, except for outward appearances, since the government is supposed to know about everything. He further strengthens this sentiment by presenting objections regarding time travel, “‘Serious objections,' remarked the Provincial Mayor, with an air of impartiality, turning towards the Time Traveller” (11). But his objections are based on other’s arguments and he is only doing it with “an air”; his argument has no substance but only exists as an appearance. Politicians have had a long-standing reputation of being fickle and insincere in their political pursuits, saying one thing one day and another the next, depending on what the current majority of society thinks. The Mayor changes his statements from understanding to objecting, following the sentiments of the others in the room rather than giving it some actual thought and raising an opinion of his own. He is thriving on the social differences of society; he is very comfortable where he is, with a lot of power and status appointed to him without a democratic election. A journey to the future might show him a future he would rather not have,
thus the idea of time travel and social power become inextricably linked; it is safer to ignore it and live in the now than risk a future where his power might be gone. The idea of time travel and a degenerated future peopled by savages would mean that a government was non-existent, in fact, the Time Traveller claims to have seen traces of communism in the future (25), which would mean that a mayor was no longer needed. This issue was however visible on a larger scale as well. England had colonized large parts of the world through force and not through election. The British Empire had prospered and expanded, but this also gave birth to a fear of its ultimate peak and the decent from there. Huxley, an influential contemporary thinker claimed that “The wealth of Croesus was nothing to that which we have accumulated, and our prosperity has filled the world with envy. But Nemesis did not forget Croesus; has she forgotten us? I think not” (167). In the Time Traveller’s future the oppressed people would turn upon their oppressors, allowing the exploited classes, who always had struggled in the shadows, to take advantage of the complacent upper classes. The Provincial Mayor ignores the Time Traveller’s theory since he fears the day that he will lose his power to the very people he took it from, thus representing the fear of losing power, not only at the level of a politician, but as Victorian England losing its colonial power.

It is however not only the Mayor who would fear the loss of power, the Editor and the Journalist/Newspaperman could be said to represent the newspaper world, the gatekeepers through whom the world’s news have to be filtered before they reach the general population, thus controlling the flow of information. If they published the story of time travel and the consequent story of a degenerated future, they would risk creating chaos and panic as people realize that their society was in danger. The emblematic attributes of the characters are visualized through their names: Mr Blank and Mr Dash. This could of course be seen as empty and derogative names; Vinson describes them as people with simple minds who cannot think for themselves (56). However, Blank and Dash are also words common within newspaper writing, which makes the names more symbolic and less heavy with the value that Vinson is suggesting. Indeed, it makes more sense to have the Editor and the Journalist/Newspaperman symbolize the newspaper world in general. They are hence present at the dinner party to report the story to the world, to support the credibility of the Time Travel. Despite their sensationalism that comes with the newspaper industry, always finding the next big scoop, they prove as reluctant to believe in time travel as the other guests:
The new guests were frankly incredulous. The Editor raised objections. 'What was this time travelling? A man couldn't cover himself with dust by rolling in a paradox, could he?' And then, as the idea came home to him, he resorted to caricature. Hadn't they any clothes-brushes in the Future? The Journalist too, would not believe at any price, and joined the Editor in the easy work of heaping ridicule on the whole thing.

(Wells 14)

They do not stop at just not accepting, but instead go on to mock the idea. Psychoanalytic theory claims that ridicule is a way to express hostile feelings in a socially acceptable way (Ferguson and Ford 287). The Editor does not turn to caricature until “the idea came home to him”, indicating that he realizes that the journey to the future might have been true. There is a fine line between fear and anger, and the Time Traveller had just brought back physical proof of his adventures and made it all too real, thus forcing the Editor and Journalist to go from hilarity to hostility, mocking the idea of time travel to protect themselves from a degenerated future. The newspaper industry had grown explosively from a circulation of 56,000 papers in 1837 to 680,000 in 1887, and with compulsory education in 1880 literacy was becoming abundant (Rose). But if society degenerated, literacy would diminish as was proven by the inhabitants of the Time Traveller’s degenerated future: “…their language was excessively simple… There seemed to be few, if any, abstract terms, or little use of figurative language. Their sentences were usually simple and of two words, and I failed to convey or understand any but the simplest propositions” (Wells 33). Without literacy and language, newspapers would become defunct, their control over people, what they get to know and how, would be non-existent and they would lose all their power. They have to deny the truth of time travel, because if they allowed themselves to accept it they would also allow society to accept it, hence creating chaos and disorder. This could create a revolution if the lower classes were presented with the possibility of a future where they were in charge, they might see the possibility of doing it now instead of the year 802701, hence creating pandemonium and the loss of superior Victorian standards. The Victorians were relying heavily on control and moral standards, and to lose it would be to lose their superiority. The Editor and the Newspaper man are the ones who makes the most obvious decision about the future, since they are not only deciding for themselves but indeed for the whole of society; in a degenerated society there would be no need for newspaper, nor the control over the people it brings. Thus they fear the loss of control and power a degenerated future would bring.
Indeed, the fact that The Editor works within the news industry should rather make him curious rather than mocking. Time travel could prove to be the next great discovery, and such a story would sell papers like nothing else. However, if the Editor, as previously stated, functions as a gatekeeper of information delivered to the public, he would not only need to reject the idea himself, but indeed try to convince the rest of the party. When the Editor later encounters the Time Traveller, he jokes about time travelling and indicates that he would pay a large sum of money for news of the future, but all with an air of ridicule, “‘I say,’ said the Editor hilariously, 'these chaps here say you have been travelling into the middle of next week! Tell us all about little Rosebery, will you? What will you take for the lot?’” (Wells 15). Ruddick explains this quote by arguing that it shows the Editor’s lack of imagination, and that he simply cannot conceive a future that does not care about horseback racing or current politics (341). However, it has to be noted that the Editor in fact is falling back on comedy, as is indicated by him talking in a “hilarious” voice, it is not with seriousness that he is suggesting a future only concerned with mundane things, but as a joke about the complete impossibility of time travel. He is arguing using familiar things, such as the next election where Rosebery was an actual candidate for Prime Minister something that the surrounding company would have been acquainted with and could understand the reference to. By making it all a joke he is indicating that there are more important things to care about than an impossible idea of time travel, and by using familiar things he is appealing to the other guests to see reason through the juxtaposition of the current election of Rosebery and the incredible idea of time travel. However, what is important here is that the election of Rosebery had not yet taken place. It was still for the candidates to vote, they had to choose this man to become Prime Minister, a man with a lot of power and the possibility to change society. By choosing him, they are not simply choosing a face to represent England, but indeed choosing a style of society, hence highlighting the issue of the degenerated future. If the guests choose to not change society and accept new ideas, such as the Time Machine and its possibilities, which in this case are linked with social equality since it shows the results of their lifestyle, they are condemned to a future of cannibalism. Rosebery was a firm believer in the commonwealth and promoted the current state of Victorian society (“Archibald Primrose”), but the Time Traveller

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describes his theory about the development of the future: “once life must have reached almost absolute safety” (Wells, 61), only to reach a hiatus of perfection, balancing on the top, and then tumble down into primitiveness and cannibalism. By choosing Rosebery they choose to not see the social problems of contemporary Victorian Britain. The Editor is trying to attract the other guest’s attention through comedy to make them to see the impossibility of time travel and instead persuade them to choose Victorian society as it is, and not consider what the future might contain.

Despite the Editor’s attempts to shield the other guests from the Time Traveller’s dangerous ideas, they do understand the theory behind time travel, which indeed suggests that they have scientific imagination. However, they still refuse to accept it (Wells 8). Psychology was a very progressive field during the Victorian era, it was actually ahead of Darwin’s theory of evolution with the initial ideas of Herbert Spencer (Rylance). Evolutionary theory was well accepted within psychology and did even have its own section called Evolutionary psychology. If the Psychologist did represent the whole field of Victorian psychology, he should in fact be able to realize the possibility of a degenerated future. Indeed, since Psychology was such a progressive field, the Psychologist seems to be more open-minded to new ideas than the other guests and is even invited to explain the time paradox by the Time Traveller:

… said the Time Traveller, and, to the Psychologist: 'You think. You can explain that. It's presentation below the threshold, you know, diluted presentation.'

'Of course,' said the Psychologist, and reassured us. 'That's a simple point of psychology. I should have thought of it. It's plain enough, and helps the paradox delightfully. (Wells 11)

The Psychologist appears to understand some of the theory of time travel, since he actually can explain to the other guests how the paradox of the disappearing Time Machine model works through the medium of psychology, he describes it by comparing it with the spokes of a wheel; if we cannot see the spokes of a spinning wheel, then we cannot see a machine that moves “fifty times or a hundred times faster than we are” (11). If he can understand it he can believe in it. But the fact remains that he does not announce his belief in the truth of the Time Traveller’s invention. No, he does in fact describe it as a trick at the subsequent dinner (13), and the question that rises is, what made him change from his previous belief to complete denial? In-between these two instances he got visible proof of the existence of the Time
Machine: not only as a small model in the cozy atmosphere of the sitting room, but as a large device deep in the Time Traveller’s laboratory (11). The Psychologist can hypothetically believe in time travel; it is not until they actually have visual proof that he rejects the idea. A hypothesis is only an abstract idea and is as such harmless. If the hypothesis on the other hand is proven, it becomes a kind of truth, and this truth creates a ripple effect, like a stone dropped in water changes the surrounding surface. The hypothesis of time travel is therefore harmless, and can to some degree be discussed and accepted, but as soon as it reaches the experimental stage, where there is a chance that the idea will become fact it becomes dangerous. What the Time Traveller is describing in his future world is the very thing that Victorian society wanted to distance themselves from: cannibalism, victimization and futility. The Time Traveller discovers the truth behind the society of the future bit by bit, at first describing it as the natural progression towards perfection, with the lack of children due to lack of war, and feebleness due to the absence of the need to use strength (26). However, as he discovers more about the future, he realizes that his initial impression was right only in part, there was more to discover and what he discovered was a darkness he could not realize until he saw it for himself. The Psychologist knows that this could happen, but he knows it only in theory. When it becomes real he denies it, the Time Traveller is un-bias in his exploration of the future, indeed, he even longs to go back to explore more (70), and since he sees everything firsthand he has to accept it. The Psychologist on the other hand can choose to ignore this gruesome result of an unequal society. Psychology was on the front line of science during the Victorian era, with new discoveries rapidly adding to each other. But that much knowledge brought with it a danger. Who would be the first to bite into the apple of knowledge, condemning humanity to a life outside the Garden of Eden? Who would be the first to take science into the dark and uncontrollable areas where degeneration could hide among the shadows? As science was developing so fast there was always a danger of too much knowledge, and psychology was dangerously close. The Psychologist has the knowledge, but does not dare to pursue it further, in case of a discovery that could tumble Victorian society.

Since science becomes fact only when the thesis is proven, the guests at the Time Traveller’s dinner can reflect upon the uses of being able to travel back and forth in time on a theoretical level; if it is only hypothetical they can theorize about it without it becoming dangerous. They can explore the possibilities within the
boundaries of contemporary time; contemporary time is a safe area and is something which is already established, “It would be remarkably convenient for the historian,' the Psychologist suggested. 'One might travel back and verify the accepted account of the Battle of Hastings, for instance!’” (8). The Battle of Hastings occurred in 1066, a time when there were not a lot of written sources, and the consequent account we have of the battle are made through interpretations and theories (Morillo xx). To verify indicates that it is considered true already; Oxford English Dictionary defines verify as “make sure or demonstrate that (something) is true, accurate, or justified”. However, it is an impossible notion. Nothing can be completely verified since we all understand the world through our own senses, perspectives and cultural filters. Hence there can be no “true” account of the Battle of Hastings, only subjective stories, each with its own motives. The Psychologist does not want to find out what actually happened, only make sure that it did happen as the accepted account describes it. Society and the present is created out of its past, but also out of the present’s perception of its past (“What is History?”), due to new influences such as ideology and scientific discoveries, the current perception of the past can change. For example, the theory of evolution changed how mankind saw its past and hence itself; today’s society would look very different if it had never been discovered. Consider then if a big historical event like the Battle of Hastings occurred differently than previously thought. It would change society’s perception of itself. It is not to explore and discover, despite his scientific title, that the Psychologist wants to travel back in time, but because of its “convenience”. It is to confirm an already accepted idea, and by confirming an old idea he is also confirming the validity of the present; the past is safe because it has already happened and only needs verification, and since they will not believe the reality of time travel, they do not have to even consider the possibility that the Battle of Hastings happened any other way. Consequently the Psychologist prefers the convenience of an already established past rather than the uncertainty, and possible dangers, of time travel.

The established past might seem like a safe area, but the past could be considered just as dangerous as the future in some respects. Degeneration must have some point of origin, somewhere where it became apparent. It could be in the far future, but it could also already have happened. Since the guests at the Time Traveller’s dinner choose to not believe in time travel, they are also choosing to not see the issues of Victorian society, to live only in the pleasant part of the now and the
established past which is already decided for them. Thus degeneration might already have happened, but they would ignore the evidence of it to be able to live in their own comfortable world. The contemporary scientist Lankes writes in his article “Degeneration: A Chapter in Darwinism” that mankind has not evolved since the ancient Greeks and uses the example to prove the degeneration of man; if we are not going forward, then we are passive or even regressing (162). The fact that society was becoming more and more comfortable was to him a definite sign of regression, that the progress in Victorian society was degenerated because the people “reject the good gift of reason with which every child is born, and […] degenerate into a contented life of material enjoyment accompanied by ignorance and superstition” (162). The direction of the progress was downwards, into a degenerated future. Stagnancy could of course be seen as going either forwards or backwards, but if positive evolution had stopped, the chances that it would be going backwards was just as high, and with the state of current society it might, according to him, just as well be going backwards. Indeed, the Time Traveller argues that the reason for the regression of the future is due to the fact that “There is no intelligence where there is no change and no need of change” (Wells 62), if society does not change, if it was still progressing, but in the same social and convenient tracks, it is set on a course where intelligence eventually becomes unnecessary. The Very Young Man imagines the uses of the past but is curbed by the Medical Man:

'One might get one's Greek from the very lips of Homer and Plato, 'the Very Young Man thought. 'In which case they would certainly plough you for the Little-go. The German scholars have improved Greek so much.' [Said the Medical Man](Wells 8)

The Very Young Man imagines using the past for educational purposes, and it is not a bad idea; Greek taught in schools would not have been too different from the ancient Greek, and texts written by Sophocles and Plato are still read in their original letters today (Mackridge 566). The Medical Man should not have to belittle the Very Young Man by counter arguing, because he makes a valid point. But if the Greek has not changed in so many years, there is a risk that nothing else has changed either, that society has regressed instead. There are not a lot of recognizable landmarks in the Time Traveller’s degenerated future, in fact there is only one structure that seems

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3 “Plough you for the Little-go” is slang for failing the Cambridge University exam in classical studies (Arata, 8n4)
somewhat familiar; a great green museum. The Palace of Green Porcelain, as the
time Traveller calls it, has some traces of past technology that are unfamiliar to the
traveller, but more importantly, there are several objects which are still familiar, such
as dinosaur skeletons, and indeed, the museum is still at the same place as the Natural
History museum of today: “Clearly we stood among the ruins of some latter day
South-Kensington” (Wells 52). The technical advances had continued for a while after
the Victorian era, but had stopped while they were still mostly recognizable. Just
imagine if he had stumbled across a touch screen, invented only about 100 years later
from his own time, would he even have called it a machine? Considered in the light of
degeneration, the fact that ancient Greek was still one of the most important languages
to know, apart from Latin, shows stagnancy in a society where it is more important to
learn a language that is not spoken, than look forward to new ideas and new, more
relevant languages. Thus the use of Greek instead becomes a possible symptom of
degeneration. It could be seen as if the Medical Man was promoting progression, but
it has to be noted that he is only promoting the present state of Greek, and not that it
might improve with the progress of time. He is not arguing for the improvement of
Greek, but against the stagnancy that could be the first signs of degeneration.

However, not all of the guests are reluctant to cast their minds forward in
time, the Very Young Man is the one who turns the discussion towards the future;

'Then there is the future,' said the Very Young Man. 'Just think! One
might invest all one's money, leave it to accumulate at interest, and
hurry on ahead!"
'To discover a society,' said I, 'erected on a strictly communistic basis.'
'Of all the wild extravagant theories!' began the Psychologist. (8)

The Very Young Man could be considered to represent the ignorance of youth, since
his name is The Very Young man, which would indicate a lack of experience. He is
one of the few who can, with the naïveté of the young, actually theorize about what
could happen in the future. Indeed, this is strengthened by the fact that he imagines a
future to which one would “hurry on ahead”, oblivious of the consequences. The
number of exclamation points in his speech further emphasizes this. The Very Young
Man expresses an immediate thought with more emotion than reflection. He can
invest all his money and then travel into the future to spend it, but he is then acting
under the presumption that the future will still look the same. This is quickly
contradicted by the Narrator who suggests a future “erected on a strictly communistic
basis”, which means a future where money would be without value, thus rendering the
Very Young Man’s idea useless since it was erected on the premises that the future would still look the same. In fact, the Time Traveller did mention the idea of communism in the future, and there was no trace of money (25). The Very Young Man can imagine a future since he is naïve enough to not realize the possibilities of degeneration, for him the future would be the same as the present, only a bit older. He represents the happy ignorance of youth in Victorian Society; he knows of nothing else than the current state of Victorian Superiority and hence he can’t imagine anything destructive happening to it.

The other character who can believe in the future is the Narrator. He is invited to both of the dinners, and actually returns to the Time Traveller’s home in Richmond to ask him yet again about the truth of the story (70). Instead of completely denying it like the other guests he considers it and indeed investigates by making further inquiries. He is called the Narrator due to the fact that he narrates the frame story, and indeed is scheduled to meet his publisher (69), which indicates his employment as a writer. As an author he has imagination in abundance; he knows that he can change the future of a story with a simple stroke of a pen, and knows hence that the future is not set in stone. At the end of the novel, the Narrator describes the future as “black and blank—a vast ignorance” and goes on to imagine all kinds of future horrors (71), his view of the future is as dark as anyone’s but he can still imagine it and think about it. Literature was on the verge of modernism during the Victorian era, which meant that the old rigid structures of writing were dissolving, creating new techniques of writing and constantly inventing new things. Thus the Narrator does not need to fear illiteracy to the same extent as the Editor; there are other ways to convey a story than through letters and language. The Narrator can easily accept the Time Traveller’s tale, indeed even be curious, since modernist literature already had shown him a new world, and this degenerated future was only one of many futures. Additionally, the Narrator does not have the same amount of power invested as the other guests, but makes a living from his imagination; he is an observer, not an actor and is therefore not affected to the same degree.

The main conclusion that can be drawn from this study is that the guests, representing the upper and upper-middle classes, choose to not to accept the Time Travellers tale, indeed his whole invention, instead of being void of scientific imagination and ignorant of the possibility of time travel. The consequence of this is that they condemn themselves to a degenerated future. Evidence of this is reflected in
the Time Traveller’s future, hence showing the relevance of the statement; when the Time Traveller is escaping the Morlocks after the visit in the Palace of Green Porcelain, he decides to make a fire and sleep the night through, thinking himself safe (58). As previously stated, the fire could be seen to represent the Victorian flame, the symbol for Victorian superiority and glory. The Time Traveller falls asleep next to the fire, feeling safe and protected, only to wake up with the fire burned out and surrounded by Morlocks, losing his main weapon against the degenerated creatures and also losing what he holds dearest in the future, his companion Weena (58). The Victorian flame is a power that needs to be guarded, it can easily burn out if not tended. If people become too comfortable and too complacent, the flame, and hence Victorian society, would burn to nothingness. The reason why the Time Traveller’s guests do not want to believe in time travel is because they were too content to live in their privileged style and too afraid of it being dissolved to think about the future. They all represent different attitudes during the Victorian era: The Medical Man the fear of technical progress, The Provincial Mayor the fear of losing power, The Editor the fear of losing control, the Very Young Man does not fear, but lives in happy ignorance and the Narrator who actually is curious and accepts the idea of Time Travel because his line of work allows to think freely. The consequence of the guests’ decision of not believing becomes a criticism against the route that society, and also science, was taking. It is a conscious choice to not believe in the time machine, which means that they are also choosing to live in the same old tracks of social inequality. *The Time Machine* becomes a looking glass and a warning example of how we shape our own future and the necessity of taking new ideas under consideration and not disregarding them because of our own comfort or fear, thus embracing the possible decline of society to avoid it. Parallels can be drawn to our own society today, for example the issue of global warming. We live in our bubble of present comfort, exploiting the earth’s resources to its very limits, knowing that the future is getting darker and hotter every day. Still we refuse to do something about it, hence condemning ourselves to a degenerated future. Just as the Medical Man, the Very Young Man, the Psychologist, the Editor, Newspaperman and the Provincial Mayor condemn themselves to a degenerated future because they refuse to see the issues and dark sides of Victorian society.
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