

“The search for something outside the self, some goal or new truth, so often in the fin-de-siècle period becomes a search within the self – with potentially devastating results.” Consider in the light of two works.

“There is no morality, no knowledge, and no hope” – Joseph Conrad

The term Fin-de-Siècle is generally used to describe a period of European history between 1890-1910. Literally meaning “the end of a Century”, the period was one of much turmoil, anxiety and pessimism about the receding present and the approach of a new era. With Darwin’s *Origin of Species* (1859) causing revolutionary scientific thinking, religion was in serious decline; as Nietzsche radically claimed, “God is dead...we have killed him – you and I”.

Darwin’s theory of evolution involved a scientific account of the process of Natural Selection, which included the idea that all species will reform and will eventually become extinct. His biological ideas had a huge impact on the writers, thinkers and the general public of the day. Philosophical ideas about a nihilistic world and its effect on mankind were rife, and at the forefront of these fields were German philosophers Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. Whilst they differ somewhat in their views, these great minds share the same pessimism that was quickly widespread across Europe, to the extent that this era has been questioned as being one of early existentialism.

The Enlightenment had already set the wheels of the fin-de-siècle in motion, for creating emancipation of secular “Reason from Revelation”. The price paid however, was the abolition of a divinely ordered universe, and provided a precursor for the fin-de-siècle period itself. Authors of this period were very much aware of their time, in a way that shows in their writing. Publications such as Max Nordau’s *Degeneration* (1892) were popular and voiced ideas and questions about the superiority of mankind, his place in the future and the power struggle between the human race and nature. These works, the growing feeling of anarchism in a dangerous and changing present, the anxiety of the unknown future, and the quest to find answers to the question of man’s – and one’s own –

identity, form the basis of works by critically acclaimed authors such as Joseph Conrad and H. G. Wells.

Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1896) and Wells' *The Time Machine* (1895) feature many similarities that depict the fin-de-siècle era perfectly. Firstly, both writers are concerned with challenging previously unquestionable notions, such as the inherent superiority of the whites over African natives in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and the perceived necessity of the British hierarchical class systems in Wells' *The Time Machine*. As these preconceived notions of order were previously divinely ordained as part of the Christian faith (as well as with the misguided idea that Western Europe, consisting of more civilised nations, was more advanced) Darwin's revolutionary thinking (amongst others) suggested that previous boundaries, limitations and conduct guidebooks about one's place in society – and the world in general – were rendered obsolete. Emphasis was placed on chance; hence natural order can no longer co-exist with this all-new atheist psychology.

Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* inferred that 'man is an onion', and with so many layers to unravel, truth is disguised, hidden from the surface, or no longer exists. Spanish philosopher Jose Orlega y Gasset asserts that, "belief in truth is a deeply rooted foundation of human life; if we were to remove it life is converted into an illusion and an absurdity..."¹ Both Conrad and Wells toy with the concept that the man has no central core or truth, no natural essence; rather man's conduct (being rendered soulless) is affected and influenced by circumstance, exemplified by Kurtz's behaviour in the jungle, and again by the Morlocks (representing the lower working class) exploitation of the elite Eloi.

Reality, as was known in the fin-de-siècle period, is an illusion. Conrad explores this theme in *Heart of Darkness*. The Europeans arrive in Africa to colonise the wild terrain (just as the aliens do in Wells' *War of the Worlds*.); immediately placing the reader in unfamiliar ground. Narrated through the eyes of Marlow, the protagonist, it becomes clear that the Europeans were on unfamiliar and unwelcoming territory, being out of place, whereas the natives "wanted no

¹ *The Root of the Modern Theme*, 1921

excuse for being there". Conrad is exceptionally skilled at deflating the pride of those who think that civilised Europeans offer a complete contrast to the savage Africans, and as Cedric Watts asserts, "Conrad turns Darwinism against political Darwinians".² Darwin's theory asserts that those that are fitter should overrun those weaker, and so the Europeans may feel it something of an obligation to invade and conquer Africa. However, it is the Europeans that "are absurdly anomalous and perish rapidly or survive as grotesque and brutal automata".³

Similarly, the Time Traveller is out of place in amongst the Eloi due to his appearance. The Eloi's paradise, appearance and relaxed mode of life is in contrast to the drab and earnest figure of the Time Traveller:

"Several more brightly-clad people met me in the doorway, and so we entered, I, dressed in dingy nineteenth-century garments, looking grotesque enough garlanded with flowers, and surrounded by an eddying mass of bright, soft-coloured roves and shining white limbs, in a melodious whirl of laughter and laughing speech."⁴

So, both writers have placed their protagonist and their own thought into different locations, and location and circumstance is key to understanding these two novels. Whilst both Wells and Conrad write explicitly with relation to those issues that arose in their time, Conrad seems to be more concerned with the short-term effect of Darwinism and man's existence placed in the present, perhaps because it had a more of a profound affect on his own lifestyle. One gets the sense he is just as affected by the question of man's place in the universe as Kurtz is, claiming to his friend Graham, "Sometimes I lose all sense of reality in a kind of nightmare effect produced by existence".

Marlow, travelling to the heart of Africa, has no motivation or drive, no voiceable reason for what has been described as his 'pilgrimage':

² *A Preface to Conrad*, Cedric Watts, 1932, Longman Group Ltd, page 88

³ *ibid*

⁴ *The Time Machine*, H. G. Wells, chapter 5.

"I...could not shake off the idea...the snake had charmed me...I felt somehow I must get there by hook or by crook...well, you see, the notion drove me" (53).

This lack of direction, purpose or motivation, except by an inexplicable desire to fill up the void caused by a revelatory lack of truth, (earlier Marlow asserts that his journey over the sea, "seemed to keep me away from the truth of things, within the toil of a mournful and senseless delusion") is particularly prominent in the fin-de-siècle era. His journey is a symbol of the process through which one discovers the deepest recesses of the self and makes use of its power. Much imagery of darkness and the jungle make sense in those terms. He is looking outside of himself for answers to questions he does not know, and will eventually be forced to look within himself and be faced with reality that he can no longer turn away or hide from.

Marlow himself doesn't pretend to be an emissary for the cause of progress, rather "the company was run for profit". He doesn't disguise himself in good intentions, like he believes so many others do. Marlow's essential character is one that depicts the Cain-Abel personality that dwells in every man. Conrad, through his protagonist's experiences suggests that man's search for the light will only bring more darkness. Marlow witnesses the betrayal and moral degeneration of Mr Kurtz who has enveloped himself in a false deity, posing as a god for the natives, and lording over his own impulses and desires. Through Kurtz, Conrad suggests that without the moral guidance and limitations of a structured society and / or religion, all men are circumstantially capable of committing crimes against humanity and morality. Whereas before all men were equal in the eyes of the Christian God, Conrad shows that all men are equal on earth, in the flesh, despite race or class. Man is thus shown in his true light; hollow, mortal, faithless and shallow, a disturbing truth that Marlow comes to partially understand and Kurtz fully realises, emphatically voicing with his infamous words, "The horror! The horror!"

Conrad claims that, "What makes mankind tragic is not that they are the victims of nature, it is that they are conscious of it". This describes the fate of Kurtz, for Marlow tells the reader that Kurtz's soul, "being alone in the wilderness...had looked within itself, and by heavens! I tell you it had gone mad". For in the mind of man, which "contains all things", there are terrifying possibilities. Away from society, there is freedom, and the ability to be or do anything. Kurtz finds freedom to be his own diabolical god. The acknowledgement of this freedom is at once exalting, as in understanding man's essence it makes one truly human, yet it is also revolting – with Kurtz this freedom is so perverted that it exceeds all preconceived human limits and becomes inhuman. Kurtz pursues the ultimate and complete assertion of himself to the exclusion of all else, allowing him to exercise this freedom, which may be said to be simply a parallel to the Western desires within society for fame, power and glory. Once Kurtz evaluates what it means to be human, however, "The horror! The horror" is the conclusion. It is interesting to note in passing that these extreme forms of desire and repulsion are central to the narrative in *The Time Machine*, which is polarised between two opposed groups of imagery concerning the Morlocks and the Eloi. Contrasting the paradisaical and the demonic within the narrative seems to be a recurring theme in fin-de-siècle literature that suggests the conflicting views and ideas that were present in the era.

With such a disturbing view on life, and man's place in the world, Conrad leaves the reader to believe that existence is thus dangerous, and menacing. The knowledge of human existence wastes people like the feverish, tormented Kurtz away, both physically and mentally, although Marlow assures us "It was not a disease". The only saving grace of this existence is through the pursuit of illusion and ignorance of the truth – enveloping oneself in aestheticism and amusement. Marlow, on his return to Europe, is nauseated to find that everyone's knowledge of life is "an irritating pretence", and he scorns them for not understanding the burden of human freedom, or his true existence.

Similarly, Wells in *The Time Machine* explores this idea of man's limitless capabilities and unavoidable mortality. Wells, like Conrad, faces the conflict of

determinism (the belief that all things are determined and that free will is an illusion) versus solipsism (the idea that the individual self constitutes the sole personal reality). With society in the fin-de-siècle debating whether universal or personal truths are more valid or correct, Wells develops a novel that addresses and contains both. For when the time traveller journeys to the year 802,701 AD, he is faced with an image of a society that is in turn completely different to 1890's Britain, yet is also resonant of, and the product of the hierarchical class system in England.

No longer one species, the human race has branched into two very different and co-dependent species. Wells must then replace the Darwinian Theory with a Marxist one. The land-dwelling Eloi have a lazy, beautiful, happy existence that resembles that of the archaic and aesthetic upper classes of the present day, whilst the Morlocks are later discovered to be cannibalistic and adapted versions of the lower (mining) classes, having lived underground for the majority of the time period; "there is a tendency to utilize underground space for the less ornamental purposes of civilisation".⁵ It is underground where production and technology are being monitored and developed, and the Morlocks, being kept in a state of servitude, have changed in appearance and adapted to their underground life, becoming intelligent, with ultra-sensitive vision, and have acquired a cruel contempt for their makers, the smaller, weaker Eloi. Note the names of these two groups is resonant of present-day adjectives that could describe their situation, such as "Elite" or "Elfin" for the musical sounding name Eloi, and 'Warlord' 'monster' or 'murder' as just some of the examples that could have attributed to the harsh sounding name 'Morlocks'.

The Time Traveller describes the situation as, "the gradual widening of the merely temporary and social difference between the capitalist and the labourer was the key to the whole position".⁶ The Morlocks have, in effect, farmed the Eloi as cattle, by providing them with fruit to eat, to cannibalistically feed their own race. This disturbing revelation leaves the Time Traveller horrified and urgent in

⁵ ibid

⁶ Ibid

his insistence that life does not continue like this any longer, “above all, avoid sinking into a condition of satisfied ease: avoid a soft and languid serenity; even evil passions which invoke continuous effort are not so deadly as the temperament of languid and harmless playfulness”.⁷ R. Haynes also believes that the epilogue, the end of the earth, “affirms the possibility of, indeed the necessity for, voluntary action on the part of the individual”.⁸ The Time Traveller finally urges that, “If [the end of the world] is so, it remains for us to live as if it were not so”.⁹

Wells has taken Darwin’s Theory of Evolution and used it to create a picture of what the future could look like. Man has no control over nature and just as other species have thrived and died out, the race of mankind is no less susceptible to this fate. R. H. Hutton shares this view, claiming: “If the doctrines as to evolution have any truth in them at all, nothing is more certain than that the superiority of man to nature will ever endure beyond the endurance of his fighting strength”.¹⁰ This image is nowhere more poignant than in the final chapter, “The Further Vision”, in which the decline of humanity is echoed and amplified by a description of the gradual death of the whole physical world, literally, the ‘fin-du-monde’. Bernard Begonzi comments on the literary power of this last chapter, “The whole of this vision of a dying world is conveyed with a poetic intensity which Wells was never to recapture. The transition from the social and biological interest of the ‘802701’ episode to the cosmological note of these final pages is well done”.¹¹

However, just as Conrad has said, “We can’t return to nature since we can’t change our place in it”, the Time Traveller in *The Time Machine* is so disturbed by the revelation and concept of the future for human nature that he insists life in the nineteenth century must change through individual voluntary action. Whereas Conrad is defeatist in his attitude to man’s place in nature (viewed through a psychological point of view, in that man cannot mean anything

⁷ *The Time Machine*, cited in R. H. Hutton, unsigned review in *Spectator*, 13 July 1895

⁸ H. G. Wells, *Discoverer of the Future*, Roslynn D Haynes, 1980, Macmillan Press Ltd, page 129

⁹ *The Time Machine*, page 117

¹⁰ R. H. Hutton, unsigned review in *Spectator*, 13 July 1895

¹¹ *The Early H. G. Wells*, Bernard Begonzi, Manchester University Press, 1961, page 59

more than he does, and he has no more superiority on the earth than a blade of grass growing in field), Wells seems to be saying that man *does* have the power to take action in the present. The Time Traveller seems to be sympathising with the 19th century proletariat, yet ironically his attitude towards the Morlocks - “It was impossible, somehow, to feel any humanity in the things”¹² – symbolises a contemporary bourgeois fear of the working class, and it may not be fanciful to impute some of this attitude to Wells himself. The Time Traveller of course is of the upper-middle classes – his tale is purposefully told to a group of white-collar institutional elements that are identified by their preoccupation, perhaps as a deliberate ploy to represent the different sectors in society that would be dubious of time travelling. Their abstract presence could go farther and hide any true personality, a name that hides their character – behind which there could be lurking anything – indeed, even another Kurtz.

Both writers make interesting use of their willingness to impart detail. The narrative in *The Time Machine* opens in a dining-room of a man who is known to us throughout as the Time Traveller, in which he expounds to his guests a somewhat remarkable theory in esoteric mathematics. He has built a time machine to convey mankind through time, a 4th dimension of space. Yet the details on this, or the way in which the machine works, are not elaborated upon. Whilst all his points in the story concerning time and space, “are entirely consistent with Einstein’s Theory”¹³, R. Haynes concurs that “Well’s major technique in creating a sense of verisimilitude lies in what an early reviewer perceptively defined as, ‘precision in the unessential and vagueness in the essential’”.¹⁴ For example, having described with utmost vagueness the model of the time machine as, “a glittering metallic framework scarcely larger than a small clock and very delicately made. There was ivory in it and some transparent crystalline substance” – a description which tells us nothing at all – he proceeds with apparent earnestness: “And now I must be explicit, for this that follows –

¹² *The Time Machine*, H. G. Wells, chapter 11

¹³ *H. G. Wells, Discoverer of the Future*, Roslynn D Haynes, 1980, Macmillan Press Ltd, page 57

¹⁴ Review of *The Plattner Story and Others*, Athenaeum, no. 3635 (26 June 1897) cited in *ibid*, page 228

unless his explanations be accepted, is an absolutely unaccountable thing".¹⁵ Yet the promised exactitude that follows departs no further elucidation about the Time Machine. Wells instead proceeds to describe in minute detail the arrangement of chairs, tables and candles in the room.

The effect of this technique is to make the experience real. Any further specific description of the Time Machine than crystal bars renders the creation less credible. Haynes agrees that, "it seems least real when endowed with a part as concrete and imaginable as a saddle, for this tends to sadden some kind of bicycle and to destroy its necessary air of mystery".¹⁶ For a discovery outside of the self is often manifest in the debate within – whether to accept it or nay.

This is seen in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* also. Marlow, like *The Time Machine* narrator, makes several discoveries, and is faced with inexplicable events. Conrad uses the same technique as Wells to make the events more plausible, both to their characters and to a reader, and to suggest that the external event, discovery or circumstance creates confusion within, and eventually leads to a revelation of truth that the character can either access or deny. Just as the Time Traveller pre-empted his listeners reaction by claiming, "you would not believe it...take it as a story. And taking it as a story, what do you think of it?" Conrad shows Marlow in a series of situations where he must interpret within himself events that are created externally beyond his control. This is termed 'Delayed Decoding' by Ian Watt; the writers give the effect whilst withholding knowledge of the cause, to make events seem more authentic.

An example of this could be the confusion on board of the ship towards a shipmate's sudden death. It is only later that Marlow – and the reader, who is placed at one with Marlow's experiences – learns a spear has pierced the said shipmate's heart, and even this revelation does not detract from the initial confusion – events are odd rather than sinister because of this. Conrad has been termed as an absurdist impressionist¹⁷ for depicting events in which awareness

¹⁵ *The Time Machine*, page 10

¹⁶ *H. G. Wells, Discoverer of the Future*, Roslynn D Haynes, 1980, Macmillan Press Ltd, page 229

¹⁷ See: *A Preface to Conrad*, Cedric Watts, 1932, Longman Group Ltd, page 102

outstrips understanding, giving his writing a vagueness that is common to *The Time Machine*. This provides another fin-de-siècle theme of shifting outside-the-self truths to within-the-self attempts at understanding. This leads to a revelation or conclusion, and the results of this conclusion can be disastrous, as is the ontological revelation that Marlow, Kurtz and the Time Traveller are faced with.

Why is Marlow so intrigued by Kurtz? The reasons are many. He is drawn in deeper and deeper, and he is not appalled by Kurtz like some others are: "What redeems it is the idea only...an unselfish belief in the idea – something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to". The others involved in the company are described as, 'faithless pilgrims', for they neither receive nor look for any illumination into the true nature of things. In *Heart of Darkness*, and also in *The Time Machine*, there are many references to religion. The Time Traveller provides a stark contrast between the light, bright warmth of the Eden garden that is home to the Eloi, and the morbid, torturous darkness of the Morlocks' underground hell. The Time Traveller witnesses the Morlocks half-eaten carcass laid out on a tablet of stone underground, resembling the last supper, and this cannibalism is resonant in Marlow's experience watching Kurtz. Kurtz has usurped the Christian god, placing himself in a Devilish reign, and can command the natives at will. Yet these cannibalistic Africans are able, and not averse to, eating Kurtz himself, as a godly figure.

The Eloi are a sacrifice made to the Morlocks (almost willingly, like Christ) and Kurtz as a make-shift Satan is no less able to command the same of his native followers. The Time Travellers descent into the hellish underground cavern can be thus paralleled with Marlow's journey to the heart of Africa, which Lillian Feder describes as, 'Marlow's descent into hell'. Marlow travels to Africa on a journey to another place to find truth, yet this truth can only be found within oneself. The setting of Africa is a perfect location, dark, hostile and dangerous as it is, to discover and explore this inner truth.

Marlow, in looking within himself at the nature of mankind, sees that civilisation is a hypocritical sophistication of savagery. Conrad makes a bold statement that all mankind has the potential for limitless evil. *Nostromo's* Decoud

reflects that whereas in the past, “barbarism...went about yelling, half-naked, with bows and arrows” today it wears, “the black coat of the politicians” (page 231). Kurtz is simply showing these repressed barbaric powers which in wilderness can display their original lustful / murderous nature. Marlow is affected as Kurtz’s double; there is something in him despite his civilised outlook that responds sympathetically to the charisma of the fallen Kurtz – he is even drawn in by the throbbing of the drums on the bank. Even women in their modern aesthetic beauty are “marble that was once primeval mud”.¹⁸ The Intended stretches out her arms towards the Kurtz of memory – a gesture which exactly duplicates that of Kurtz’s savage mistress.

Even the Time Traveller is affected by his location. The circumstances of the Eloi paradise begin to exercise its spell on the Time Traveller, distorting all that he once held dear, such as finding his machine, being active in further discovery and getting back to his own time; “It behooves me to be calm and present...after all, it was a beautiful and curious world”. This attachment (representing, like with Kurtz, a desire for languid ease, success, entertainment, beauty and power) is strengthened by his relationship with Weena, perhaps the ‘biggest flaw in the narrative’.¹⁹ Yet the Time Traveller is more a man of his own age, time and society (unlike Kurtz) to succumb to the Eloi’s lifestyle: “I am too occidental for a long vigil”. The Time Traveller, not content with his disturbing discoveries of the year 802,701, travels further still into the future, and witnesses, to even more extreme dismay, the extent of the horrors that mankind must face – the end of the world.

With such dismal, cynical outlooks on life, it is a wonder there was any literature produced at all. Reality as man knows it, both authors claim, is not reality at all. The truth to man’s existence is too nightmarish to be faced, and thus must be hidden from those not equipped to deal with it (Marlow says of Kurtz’s Intended, “the truth is hidden – luckily, luckily”). With the concept of human existence being so terrible, empty and fleeting, culminating into extinction and

¹⁸ Ibid, page 101

¹⁹ *The Early H. G. Wells*, Bernard Begonzi, Manchester University Press, 1961, page 45

nothing beyond but a dying world, it is natural that there will be different reactions to this knowledge. Most, as Marlow acknowledges, hide this knowledge in ongoing trivial pursuits and amusements. Others, such as Wells himself, with his scientific upbringing, attempts to imagine the effect that evolution has on generations to come, whilst Conrad is more affected by the fin-de-siècle pessimism in the present: “Sometimes I lose all sense of reality in a kind of nightmare effect produced by existence”.²⁰

If the hollow existence and potential decline of mankind renders everything in life as we know it pointless and aesthetic only; “I am allowed nothing but fidelity to an absolutely lost cause, to an idea without a future”²¹, it is not a valid reason or justification to give up on art. Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan claims “But one could also argue, as George Lukacs does, that all good literature attempts to restore the lost unity of life and meaning by saying, “and yet!” to life” and in this Conrad through Marlow claims his right of speech, “I have a voice too, and for good or evil mine is the speech that cannot be silenced”. Of course both Conrad and Wells go on to explore the fin-de-siècle and the themes it represents, yet no other works in their literary history explore so poignantly the plight of mankind’s struggle for existence, and the truth surrounding this existence. *Heart of Darkness* and *The Time Machine* are inextricably linked to the self, and, with their shocking content and imagery, provide a visionary challenge for generations to come.

²⁰ Letter to Cunninghame Graham, 31st Jan 1898, in Joseph Conrad’s letters to Cunninghame Graham, edited by C. T. Watts (Cambridge University Press) , 1969, 70-1

²¹ Ibid, letter 8th Feb 1899