

Book Report on *The Time Machine*

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Synopsis

The story begins with a discussion on the possibility of the fourth dimension ---- time, and the means to move freely along it. With these in mind, the Time Traveler has finally worked out the Time Machine which allows him to go far into the future.

There he sees a world of total difference - the Golden Age of AD. 802,701, and it is the friendly little creatures the Eloi that he meets first. Feeding on fruits, the Eloi live together in a splendid palace and love flowers, sunlight and dancing. Contrary to what the Time Traveler thought, the men of the future are not more intelligent than we are, but only as intellectual as a 5-year-old child. Yet, the future world is as ideal as one might have thought: no violence, no disease, no toil, and is in perfect security and comfort.

However, something mysterious seems to destroy this peaceful world. The Time Traveler discovers the Under-ground World, in which lives another human race the Morlocks, who are fierce, nocturnal, and man-eating! These evil creatures work and live with machines under the ground as their habit.

During his stay, the Time Traveler has concluded that the future world is to be the triumph of the Nature and the triumph of fellow men. The physical and mental decay of the Eloi is the result of disappearance of the need to change in such a perfect world, and the violent Morlocks are the long-oppressed labourers who come up to destroy the perfect world. Although this world is strange, something impresses him - the beauty of humanity as shown in an Eloi girl Weena.

Leaving the Golden Age, the Time Traveler goes even further into the future and is horrified by the coldness and the extinction of nearly all living things in the world.

He returns to the present but soon sets out on another journey in the Time Machine.....

Selective Exposition

1. After the conquest of Nature

There are no worries, sadness, anxiety nor any kind of labour in the Upper-world of the future. The Eloi are perfectly protected by preventive medicine from any potential disease, and are therefore immortal. Their lives are enriched by superior and abundant materials as suggested by their extremely glorious ruins, fine clothing, and tasty new species of fruits. Yet, these all come at a cost.

The Eloi have suffered degradation in both their physical power and intellectual level after mankind has reached the climax of conquering Nature. Not only has their height shrunk from five feet, which is average for a normal man of present days, to only around four feet, but their energy and intelligence have also fallen to a five-year-old child's level. All that these lazy creatures do is play around, eat, bathe and sleep. In addition, their language seems to have become as simplified as it was in the days before the civilization of man, let alone their logical

thinking, ability of judging, imagination and creativity. Being as curious as a child, the Eloi have their interests in matters only as long as a little boy does. They are never determined to do anything, nor show any bit of perseverance in their character. After all, what are regarded as the qualities of man - being strong, energetic, intelligent, and persistent, are gone together with the danger and uncertainties in life.

The reasons behind these decays are clear. Intelligence and perseverance have been the result of overcoming the threat that the insecure and changing environment poses to man. Our ancestors had utilized all their strength and brain to adapt to as well as alter disastrous conditions in order to survive. Once they succeeded, their body and mind got trained, and wisdom grew. Even if they failed, they would be eager enough to find other ways and try again. Hence, their persistence was developed. The process goes on and on for hundreds of thousands of years in the history of civilization, and has made men unique and superior. After the complete conquer of Nature, men have entered a world of perfect security and permanency, where nothing changes or ever needs to be changed. The external conditions, which had trained men to be strong, hardworking, intellectual and persistent, vanish. By no means men of the future can utilize or be trained of the physical and mental vitalities of their own, just like the Eloi in the story, who finally suffer from slow degradation. To the writer, this seems to be an inevitable outcome after the total triumph of Nature is achieved by men.

Perhaps this would just be the ultimate consequence of how humans suffer from deskilling under the increasingly wide usage of advanced technology. No doubt, these days, while there are still problems that we fail to address with current technology, we are experiencing a much higher degree of deskilling in our lives: deteriorating memory, worsening calculating ability, increasing difficulties in writing properly with a pen, and weakening adaptability to the environment. The process of deskilling is significant yet sometimes unnoticeable. One is hardly aware of the gradual loss of his skills under the intensive application of technology, or the fact that he would have actually acquired more skills if less technology is used. In short, we enjoy the possibilities and efficiency technology brings at the expense of our own abilities and chances to develop them. Men benefit from technology, but only at a cost. The stronger the technologies, the weaker we are. This point might be related to an aspect of technological determinism: men are to be totally determined by technology, which they create and apply, to an extent that they are no longer free. The Eloi in the book illustrate exactly this case and they suggest what we might become in future. The triumph over Nature might be the end of human liberty.

2. After the conquest of fellow-men

The future world is still of, at least, two classes: the capitalists and the labourers, as predicted by the writer, and are represented by two completely different and even opposing worlds - the Upper-world and the Under-world. The former is home to the Eloi and is a place of heaven: full of light, warmth, beauty, happiness and security. Men in this world engage in no work and all their needs and desires are dependent upon and satisfied by the labourers of the Under-world. These privileged people enjoy their lives in wealth and comfort while those in the Under-world find work as their only way of life. In addition, the Under-world is full of darkness, coldness, suffocation, and cruelty. The Morlocks in this world live and work in the huge underground factory with extensive tunneling and numerous wells connected to the open space. Apart from

doing all the toil, these people enter the Upper-world at night to destroy and search for preys – the Eloi in this case. Unlike their above-ground counterparts, who are friendly and kind, the Morlocks are fierce and violent.

The story gives us some insights of how our society is divided into classes and what might happen if this structure persists. It is obvious that the upper class produces nothing but enjoys almost all the products and wealth. In the eyes of William Morris this class is a burden of the society as it is sustained by hard work of its fellow men. Driven by desires for wealth and pleasure, the upper class forces as well as exploits the majority of people to labour. On the one hand, these desires might be of human nature. On the other hand, they are bred by civilization itself, which forbids the satisfaction of their desires. Yet, the working class labours solely to support the rich and their wages are merely enough for a living. They are neither driven by willingness nor pleasure to work, but forced by the upper class to do so. Their meagre earnings might serve as a push factor of more toil, but hopes of rest, product and pleasure in work are still to be expected by any workers.

The hope of rest is the most basic one for all humans. Work, no matter with or without pleasure, carries a certain degree of exhaustion, which drives men to hope for a rest. However, this rest should not merely allow men to recover from their hard work, but includes pleasure for them to enjoy and prepares them for work again. Secondly, the hope for products of labour implies the pleasure to see the outcome of work to be something good and worthy to normal people and through this, workers feel that their labour is meaningful. The hope of pleasure in work involves exercising the human brain and body in a way that one's individuality is reflected. Only works that fulfill these three hopes are useful, as put forward by Morris.

In the book, the writer mentions that Necessity has become the watchword and excuse for the Upper-world to force his fellow men to work. Indeed, this is the same case in the world of today. We seldom come to realize the real necessity of many things around us: air conditioners, mobile phones, computers, or even watches. We think we need them just because they appear to be Necessities. On the one hand, technology has raised productivity enormously. On the other hand, the surge in supply compels the manufacturers to make these products into necessities through the medium of advertising and to appeal to the working class. It is not because of the real need of people that these products are made. Therefore the products are not useful.

In addition, the hope of pleasure in work is not fulfilled. Since industrialization began, men have become nothing more than a screw in a machine. Repetitive and stereotypical work is all the content of men's work. Not only is he alienated from Nature, but also the products he made, his fellow workers and even himself, as Erich Fromm argues in his book *Beyond the Chains of Illusion-my Encounter with Marx and Freud*. Another writer Arnold J. Toynbee also suggests people can get nothing but boredom and regimentation. None of his experience, skills, and creativity is involved in the working process. Hence, the hope of pleasure in work is deferred and the products made under these conditions are again useless.

Though the hope of rest is normal to any human being, never before have work and pleasure been completely separated from each other in men's life, according to Toynbee. To the working

class, a rest allows them not only to refresh, but to replenish through recreation, which has been taken away from them by work. Oppressed and exploited, Toynbee argues the working class will finally take revenge on the society for an injury that society has done to them. In this sense, it is not surprising to see how the Morlocks in *The Time Machine* have eventually come to like their cold-blooded acts of man-eating. Nonetheless, the same might come true one day as long as the 'injury of men' is not cured but deteriorates.

Evaluation

1. A wake-up call on civilization

I think *The Time Machine* is of great significance on the critical reflection of the dream of men: to enjoy the comfort and permanency brought about by the complete triumph over Nature and fellow-men. The writer's prediction is certainly a wake-up call to many that this utopia might come at a cost, and might not be as perfect as we thought.

The Time Machine could be compared to another book about utopia, *Erewhon* by Samuel Butler, although they carry two totally different attitudes towards civilization and technology: worship and abandonment. No doubt, the world in *The Time Machine* puts technology in a prime position. It is seen as the only means by which men could achieve the goals of conquering Nature and his fellow men. They do not notice the potential danger of technology corroding their body and soul, nor are they eager to seek alternative ways of living. Since they do not foresee it, they have become totally determined by technology. However, the people in the *Erewhon* are clever enough to have predicted that the increasingly rapid growth rate of machinery, under the eager help of men, might eventually overtake humans. For this reason, they abandon all kinds of technology invented in the last three hundred years.

Contrary to other threats around us like the bird flu, air pollution, or even thieves breaking into one's house, the threat that technology poses is rather invisible, but it could be as threatening as an invading army. Neither will our property be stolen nor shall we be killed, but we are unconsciously becoming its slaves.

Some argue that the machinery has lightened men's toil, but it has actually burdened men in other aspects. Apart from taking care of the health of men themselves, the 'health' of machines seems to appear even more important in the industrial society in which productivity is everything. Men devote a lot of effort to the maintenance, repair, operation and improvement of machines. Although men are lightened with toils that are now done by machines, our responsibilities grow in 'serving' them. In the end, machinery has not made men freer, but more regimented by transforming the previous toil into another form. Not only has man's physical energy been put into caring the machinery, but his relationship with Nature and his fellow workers has been prevented from developing and is replaced by the boredom of mechanization. Hence, modern men suffer seriously from spiritual emptiness and self-alienation.

What makes the situation worse is the continuous expansion of technology and the relative weakening of human beings. Man has spent all their energy and intelligence on empowering the machines but not his own self. He thought that the more he has, the stronger he is. Yet, as

pointed out by Fromm, 'modern man has many things and uses many things, but he is little.' He worships the technology he creates and it gives him an illusion that he is powerful. What really mean most to a man - being active in all the work that he engages in and his own gifts of feeling, thinking and creating, have been left untouched and neglected. This is certainly something ridiculous and sad for human beings.

2. Insight on Communism

The book also provides some insightful ideas on Communism as presented in the Upper-world of the Eloi, where private houses are all replaced by large, commonly owned palaces, and families, by large communities. People of the future seem to live in harmony and peace with Communism as a real practice. The writer seems to be conveying the message that it is only when humans lose their intellect and become as simple as children that Communism will truly take place.

Talking about Communism, one is immediately reminded of the classic writing of George Orwell, *Animal Farm*. In his book, Orwell shows the reasons why Communism cannot be realized in the real world: it is human nature that we desire power and wealth, which contradicts with the common and equal principle of Communism. On this account, every practice of this idea would eventually turn out to be another form of dedication to Capitalism. Among Communist countries in the world, it is clear that none is enjoying real Communism. China perhaps is one of the most prosperous Communist countries and is indeed practicing Socialism with its own Chinese characteristics, which is in other words, state-controlled Capitalism. Yet, under this so-called Communism, there have already been injustice and unfairness. The June fourth Incident of 1989 is a clear example of power abuse and cruelty in a Communist country, and it proves Orwell's belief that there would hardly be any ideal Communism in the real world.

Nonetheless, when man no longer clings to power or wealth, and in his heart there is only love and care, Communism would probably arrive. In the world of future, though men might not be intelligent and persistent, the beauty of human love grows. It seems to the writer that this kindness is equally precious. Even without strength and power, man's humanity still shines with tenderness in his heart.

Conclusion

On the whole, I think *The Time Machine* is a science fiction with serious criticism. Being rich and deep in ideas of critical appreciation of civilization, the book is still full of suspense, and enjoyment. Not only is the perception of the author on the future world innovative and unique, but it also raises a number of significant questions that modern men need to ask themselves. How much good and harm is civilization doing on men? To what extent are we aware of this? Is conquering Nature and our fellow men the only means to bring us true happiness? And what is civilization after all?

The book not only foresees the destiny of man after civilization has reached its climax, but it also includes ideas on classes in the society and insights about Communism and humanity. It certainly serves as a wake-up call, urging modern men to look civilization into greater depth and

rethink the idea of utopia. It also seems to the writer that Communism might eventually take place, if the power and strength of men are gone but love and care remain.

Recommendation on reading

Written in the 19th century, *The Time Machine* has many ancient English words which may be confusing at first. Therefore, it is advisable that one be equipped with a dictionary when reading to comprehend the story in a more precise way. Apart from that, it would be better for one to have a basic understanding of the background of the book to better grasp the argument put by the writer. Finally, it is crucial to interpret the underlying meaning of the message conveyed in the book, try to apply it in the present-day world and allow it to impact one's ways of life from now on.

To sum up, *The Time Machine* brings readers an alternative angle of how to understand the nature of civilization and inspirations that facilitate self-reflection. It is worth reading for both the excitement of time traveling and the process of mind-widening.

Reference

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