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Christian Eschatology and Science Fiction: An Study of HG Wells' *The Time Machine*

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Abstract

Eschatology, a stream of theology has been concerned primarily with the final events of history, the final fate of mankind, and the end of the world. Different Religions grapple with these questions in different manners, portraying the end times as a period of destruction, followed by resurrection, regeneration, and finally rebirth. Similarly many works of Literature till date have tried to present alternative discourses regarding the final events. The Question of Eschatology, is a particularly important theme for the Science Fiction Writers. When they place their subject in a time far removed from their present times, the question of “the end” stares them in the face. H.G Wells in his acclaimed Science Fiction Novella *The Time Machine* sends his time Traveller to a distant future, where he finds humankind evolved into two species. However, travelling further in time, he finds all life reduced to an indistinct mass. The much feared Apocalypse is not sudden, but a gradual process that continues over millions of years. This Paper attempts to analyse Wells’ treatment of Eschatology in the novel and show how Wells as a precursor to modern Science Fiction brings home the idea that Christian Eschatology holds little to no substantial value when juxtaposed with the events that would shape the advanced Future. This paper also seeks to show how Wells treatment of the subject matter makes the religious ideas of being reborn and united in the final events seem like a farfetched reality or more so, an impossibility.

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Christian Eschatology

What is Christian Eschatology? In the simplest of the words, it is the study of the last things. Being primarily concerned with the coming of “god” and the events surrounding such an appearing, the Bible expects and encourages believers to look toward his coming with anticipation. Though the future may hold within its folds, various events beyond the comprehension of the mankind, there is a strong belief in a final event/s which will complete the circle of life and return all beings to their creator. Louis Berkhof wrote:

In Christology, the question, how the work of Christ is crowned with perfect victory; in soteriology, the question, how the work of the Holy Spirit at last issues in the complete redemption and glorification of the people of God; and in ecclesiology, the question of the final apotheosis of the church (Systematic Theology, 665).

Though different theological thoughts put forward varied interpretations of the Final destiny of mankind, there is a general agreement on four events which are The Return of Christ, The Resurrection of Believers and Unbelievers, The Judgment of Believers and Unbelievers and Eternal Destinies.

According to Neil Gilman, the discussions about eschatology arise mainly out of the human need to give a sense of order to the chaos and anarchy surrounding the cosmos:

Human beings are structuring animals. We need structure. We structure space and we structure time. We create seconds, minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, years, what Heschel so felicitously named, “the architecture of time.”

These structures bring order out of anarchy. Homogenized, structure-less time would be chaotic. (Gilman,40)

Gilman is of the opinion that while as microscopically, human beings divide the day into hours, or months or years into specific time frame, macroscopically they structure history with a beginning, a middle and a possible end. Without theories about an end, the beginning

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and the middle are thrown into jeopardy too. The need for the science of Eschatology, thus, arises out of the innate nature of structuring human beings.

The Three Stops in the novel

HG Wells' *The Time Machine* takes the reader on a journey traversing through thousands of years. The nameless Time Traveller builds a contraption that allows him to travel back and forth in time. He chooses to go forth into the future to witness the glory of the future but is dismayed to see the predicament of the human beings in the future. The Time Machine makes its stops at three vital points. The first stop, the pivotal part of the novella is among the Child like Humanoids called Eloi and the Ape Like Morlocks. The Eloi are small, cherub-like cheerful people dressed in silk garments, but they are also on the other hand, frail, fragile creatures who lack intelligence. The Morlocks on the other hand, are rough, underground creatures that are pitted against the Eloi. The Time Traveller comes to the Conclusion that Human Race has degenerated into two distinguishable species. This Conclusion is a strong anti thesis to a vision of a glorious future for the mankind.

...Morlocks—that, by the by, was the name by which these creatures were called—I could imagine that the modification of the human type was even far more profound than among the 'Eloi,' the beautiful race that I already knew.”
(Wells,80)

The second stop is a further evolved state where the life forms have further degenerated into giant butterfly like creatures and colossal crabs. A further degeneration of the Eloi and the Morlocks has produced simpler creatures who are farther away from the human ideal. The most obvious conclusion is that the Eloi have shown a downward evolution into the giant butterflies while as the animal like Morlocks have been degraded into crabs. An noteworthy observation here, would be, that the mental abilities of both the species have been reduced greatly, only their sizes have increased. A Violent hierarchy between the two still remains, though on a simpler, cruder level. A sense of gloom pervades this future devoid of any human or human like presence:

...the stony beach crawling with these foul, slow-stirring

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monsters, the uniform poisonous-looking green of the lichenous plants, the thin air that hurts one's lungs: all contributed to an appalling effect"(Wells, 134)

The third stop is in a much distant, remote future where life has been reduced to a formless black blob. Passing through these three stages, the world has been degraded to its basic components, with the barest signs of life. These stages also suggest a possibility that further in to the future, the only thing populating the earth is Nothing:

As I stood sick and confused I saw again the moving thing upon the shoal—there was no mistake now that it was a moving thing—against the red water of the sea. It was a round thing, the size of a football perhaps, or, it may be, bigger, and tentacles trailed down from it; it seemed black against the weltering blood-red water, and it was hopping fitfully about." (Wells,137)

Science Fiction and Eschatology

The future of the Science Fiction is , for the most part, dystopian in nature. Polluted Environments, Over-arching technology, Tyrannical Governments, Electronic Societies characterize the imagined Future. This dystopic vision paints a grim post-apocalyptic picture of the world, where the primary concern is Survival. In a world, where human beings are pitted against each other for mere survival, the question of a human subject, or of salvation seems far fetched. Human beings, in remote futures, are on the brink of losing their humanities as well as their human status.

Andreas Sofroniou in his book *Philosophy and Science of Eschatology* says :

Researchers in future studies and transhumanists investigate how the accelerating rate of scientific progress may lead to a "technological singularity" in the future that would profoundly and unpredictably change the course of human history and result in Homo Sapiens no longer being the dominant life form on earth (78)

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Sofroniou also mentions Physical Eschatology in his book where he defines it as ‘long term predictions of astrophysics.’ The Planet Earth may no longer be suitable to live in, the Sun would turn into a red giant which would later gobble up the earth. Instead of a religious doomsday, Science Fiction leads to another kind of doomsday which is essentially scientific in nature. This doomsday would not be sudden and dramatic like the one in the scriptures, but slow and gradual. Also, majority of the human population would probably have been already wiped out by the extremely harsh conditions preceding this end.

Hiley H. Ward in *Religion 2101 A.D* demonstrates how the breakthroughs of future, will force humanity to re-engage with the most basic of concepts, such as the human self and human subjectivity. When the human being is no longer the centre of the world, things are thrown out of balance. History, which had been man-focussed till then will change its course to adjust to a new non-human centric form. While a world, devoid of human life may seem preposterous from a humanistic lens, it nevertheless remains a possibility in the works of Science Fiction.

When the Time Traveller travels far forward in time, what greets him is not a sudden apocalypse that that changed the course of human history for ever. Instead, his movement into time corroborates exactly with what has happened before. When he lands in the Future consisting of the Fragile Eloi and the terrifying Morlocks, a picture of the farther future is already painted. The division of the Eloi and the Morlocks according to their weak and roughly built bodies gives ample evidence for the events of the future. If humanity has descended from the Social division of the Capitalists and the working class into an actual anthropological division of the Eloi and the Morlocks, then it can only go downhill from there.

The Eloi, or the “civilized” creatures are not the culmination of super human intelligence as one would have expected, but they are weaker, both intellectually as well as physically. The Morlocks too, though brute in force and strength, don’t fit the position of an ideal man. Since these two species are the only ones that inhabit the future earth, the hope for any redemption is lost, quite early in the Work. The Eloi and the Morlocks are a result of the

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degradation of the human species and their own degradation would in turn result in the formation of species which would be farther away from the Ideal. This degradation is given a concrete form in the shape of giant crabs and butterflies, which have not only lost all human intellectual capabilities, but also the distinguishable human form. As the Time Traveller travels farther into the remote future, life has been reduced to a “blob”. Even the distinction between the giants bugs has been done away with. If this journey is continued, there would indeed be a time, when life would just cease to exist. HG Wells’ Future doesn’t thus need an apocalyptic event to end, it is ending itself daily, without fail.

Conclusion

Well’s Time Traveller finds a world eroded to its basic components, with the barest signs of life — first giant moths and hulking crabs, then, even further along, just lichen and an indistinguishable mass flopping about in a shallow sea. Instead of continuing to prosper and evolve into a higher species, Human beings have embarked on a process of continual degradation or even simplification. Whereas the Social Scientists or the Anthropologists argue for the Theory of Evolution, Wells’ novel suggests otherwise. If the process of reverse evolution would continue unabated, it would ultimately result in the complete annihilation of life from the planet. With the absence of the very fiber of life, the question of the final end doesn’t arise. If life ends, it ends insignificantly and without any final dramatic event. In a post apocalyptic world, “this is the way the world ends, not with a bang, but with a whimper” (Eliot)

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