

Evolutionary Thought of Charles Darwin and Its Literary Transformation in the Works of H. G. Wells

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Abstract

This study explores the profound influence of Darwinian evolutionary theory on the literary imagination of H. G. Wells. Drawing upon the foundational ideas of Charles Darwin, particularly natural selection, adaptation, and survival of the fittest, the paper examines how Wells transforms scientific concepts into compelling narrative structures and character formations. Through close textual analysis of key works such as *The Time Machine*, *The War of the Worlds*, and *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, the study highlights the depiction of evolutionary degeneration, social conflict, and existential uncertainty. It argues that Wells not only popularizes Darwinian thought but also critiques its social and ethical implications. The research demonstrates that evolutionary theory serves as both a thematic and structural foundation in Wells's fiction, shaping his vision of humanity's uncertain future.

1. Introduction

The publication of *On the Origin of Species* (1859) by Charles Darwin revolutionized scientific thought by introducing the theory of evolution through natural selection. This groundbreaking idea challenged traditional religious and philosophical beliefs about human origin and destiny. The impact of Darwinism extended far beyond biology, profoundly influencing literature, philosophy, and social theory during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Among the writers most deeply affected by Darwinian thought was H. G. Wells, a pioneering figure in science fiction. Wells, trained in science under T. H. Huxley, absorbed evolutionary ideas and reinterpreted them within imaginative literary frameworks. His works frequently explore themes such as adaptation, survival, degeneration, and the fragility of human civilization. Novels like *The Time Machine* present a future shaped by evolutionary divergence, while *The Island of Doctor Moreau* interrogates the ethical boundaries of scientific experimentation.

This paper aims to analyze how Darwinian evolutionary thought is transformed into literary expression in Wells's works. It examines the ways in which scientific principles are embedded in narrative structures and character development. Furthermore, the study seeks to understand how Wells critiques the social implications of Darwinism, including class division, imperialism, and moral degeneration. By bridging science and literature, Wells not only reflects contemporary anxieties but also anticipates future concerns about human evolution and survival.

Background of the Study

The late Victorian era was marked by rapid scientific advancement and intellectual transformation. Darwin's theory of evolution disrupted established worldviews, leading to debates across disciplines. Literature became a significant medium for interpreting and disseminating these ideas. Wells emerged in this context as a writer who combined scientific knowledge with creative imagination. His academic background in biology enabled him to engage deeply with evolutionary theory. At the same time, the rise of industrialization, imperial expansion, and social inequality influenced his perception of human progress. Wells's fiction reflects these tensions by portraying evolution not as a linear process of improvement but as a complex, often troubling phenomenon. This study situates Wells within this intellectual and historical framework to examine how Darwinian thought is reconfigured in literary form.

Review of Literature

Patrick Parrinder (1980), highlights the central role of H. G. Wells in the development of modern science fiction, particularly through his engagement with evolutionary theory. Parrinder argues that Wells's narratives are deeply informed by Charles Darwin's concepts of natural selection and adaptation, which he transforms into imaginative literary frameworks. In works such as *The Time Machine* and *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, Wells explores the consequences of unchecked evolution, degeneration, and the instability of human progress. Parrinder emphasizes that Wells not only popularized scientific ideas but also critiqued their social implications, portraying a future shaped by biological and environmental forces. Thus, the study positions Wells as a pioneer who integrated evolutionary thought into science fiction, influencing both the genre's thematic depth and its philosophical concerns. [01]

Darko Suvin (1979), introduces the concept of "cognitive estrangement" to explain the distinctive nature of science fiction, and he identifies H. G. Wells as a key practitioner of this technique. According to Suvin, Wells's works employ scientific ideas not merely as background elements but as central devices that create a sense of estrangement from ordinary reality while remaining intellectually comprehensible. This balance between familiarity and innovation allows readers to critically reflect on human society, ethics, and progress. In novels such as *The Time Machine* and *The War of the Worlds*, Wells uses evolutionary theory and speculative science to challenge existing social structures and assumptions. Suvin emphasizes that this fusion of imagination and rationality transforms science fiction into a serious literary form, with Wells's fiction exemplifying how scientific concepts can generate both narrative innovation and critical insight. . [02]

Bernard Bergonzi (1961), examines the theme of degeneration in the works of H. G. Wells, emphasizing its close connection with social criticism. Bergonzi argues that Wells was deeply influenced by late nineteenth-century anxieties about evolutionary decline, which he vividly represents through his fictional worlds. In texts such as *The Time Machine*, the division between the Eloi and Morlocks symbolizes the potential degeneration of humanity under class division and industrial exploitation. Bergonzi highlights that Wells uses such speculative scenarios not merely for imaginative effect but to critique contemporary social structures, including capitalism, class inequality, and moral complacency. The study suggests that degeneration in Wells's fiction serves as both a warning and a

reflective tool, revealing the fragility of human progress. Thus, Bergonzi positions Wells as a socially conscious writer who integrates evolutionary fears with sharp cultural and political critique. . [03]

Robert M. Philmus (1975) explores how H. G. Wells skillfully integrates scientific concepts with narrative structure in his novels. Philmus argues that in Wells's fiction, science is not merely decorative but functions as a foundational element that shapes plot development, character behavior, and thematic depth. Drawing upon contemporary scientific ideas, including evolutionary theory and technological progress, Wells constructs narratives that are both imaginative and intellectually grounded. Philmus emphasizes that this fusion enables Wells to maintain narrative plausibility while exploring speculative possibilities. Works such as *The Invisible Man* and *The War of the Worlds* demonstrate how scientific premises drive the storyline and create tension, while also raising ethical and philosophical questions. The study concludes that Wells's success lies in harmonizing scientific reasoning with literary creativity, thereby establishing a model for modern science fiction. . [04]

John Huntington (1982) analyzes the utopian and dystopian dimensions in the works of H. G. Wells, emphasizing their grounding in evolutionary thought. Huntington argues that Wells's fiction reflects a tension between optimism about human progress and anxiety over evolutionary decline. Through speculative futures, Wells presents utopian visions shaped by scientific advancement and rational planning, while simultaneously portraying dystopian outcomes resulting from misapplied knowledge and social inequality. Influenced by evolutionary theory, these contrasting visions highlight the unpredictability of human development and the fragile nature of civilization. Huntington suggests that Wells does not present a fixed future but rather multiple possibilities conditioned by human choices and environmental forces. Thus, Wells's narratives function as both imaginative projections and critical reflections on the direction of modern society. . [05]

Gillian Beer (1983), explores the profound influence of Charles Darwin's evolutionary theory on Victorian literature, demonstrating how scientific ideas reshaped narrative forms and thematic concerns. Beer argues that Darwin's concepts—such as natural selection, adaptation, and the struggle for existence—challenged traditional religious and philosophical beliefs, prompting writers to reimagine human identity, time, and progress. She highlights that Victorian authors, including H. G. Wells, absorbed and reinterpreted these ideas within their works, often reflecting uncertainty, instability, and transformation in both plot and character. Beer emphasizes that literature did not merely reflect science but actively engaged with and extended its implications. Thus, the study positions Darwinian thought as a major intellectual force that fundamentally influenced the evolution of Victorian literary imagination and narrative experimentation. . [06]

George Levine (1988) examines the narrative implications of Charles Darwin's evolutionary theory in fiction, arguing that Darwinism fundamentally reshaped literary structures and modes of storytelling. Levine suggests that concepts such as randomness, adaptation, and the absence of a fixed teleological order influenced writers to move away from linear, deterministic plots toward more open-ended and contingent narratives. He highlights that fiction began to reflect a world governed by uncertainty and change, where characters are shaped by environmental and biological forces rather than moral absolutes. Authors like H. G. Wells incorporate these ideas to depict unstable futures and evolving human conditions. Levine concludes that Darwinism not only provided thematic material but also transformed the very form of narrative, encouraging complexity, ambiguity, and realism in modern fiction. . [07]

Mark R. Hillegas (1967) examines the role of future speculation and evolutionary anxiety in the fiction of H. G. Wells. Hillegas argues that Wells's imaginative projections of the future are deeply shaped by contemporary concerns about evolution, degeneration, and the uncertain destiny of humanity. In works such as *The Time Machine*, Wells envisions distant futures where human evolution leads not to progress but to division, decay, and possible extinction. Hillegas emphasizes that these speculative narratives reflect broader late Victorian fears regarding social instability, scientific advancement, and the loss of human control over natural processes. Rather than presenting a hopeful vision, Wells often depicts evolution as unpredictable and potentially destructive. The study concludes that Wells uses future speculation as a means to explore existential anxieties, making his fiction both scientifically informed and philosophically unsettling. . [08]

W. Warren Wagar (1961) investigates the interconnected vision of history and evolution in the works of H. G. Wells, emphasizing how Wells conceptualizes human progress within a broad evolutionary framework. Wagar argues that Wells views history not as a linear or purely progressive process but as one shaped by biological forces, scientific advancement, and social transformation. Influenced by Charles Darwin's evolutionary theory, Wells integrates the idea of continuous change and adaptation into his interpretation of historical development. Wagar highlights that Wells's writings reflect both optimism for a scientifically organized future and concern over potential regression or collapse. His historical vision thus combines utopian aspirations with evolutionary uncertainty. The study concludes that Wells presents history as dynamic and contingent, where human destiny is influenced by both rational planning and unpredictable evolutionary forces. . [09]

Roslynn D. Haynes (1994) examines the representation of scientists in literature, with particular attention to ethical concerns surrounding scientific inquiry. Haynes argues that literary texts often portray scientists as complex figures, ranging from visionary innovators to morally ambiguous or even dangerous individuals. In the works of H. G. Wells, such as *The Invisible Man* and *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, scientists are depicted as figures whose pursuit of knowledge can lead to ethical transgression and social harm. Haynes emphasizes that these portrayals reflect broader cultural anxieties about unchecked scientific progress and the potential consequences of violating moral boundaries. The study concludes that literature plays a crucial role in interrogating the responsibilities of scientists, highlighting the tension between intellectual ambition and ethical accountability. [10]

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the influence of Darwinian evolutionary theory on Wells's fiction.
2. To analyze the transformation of scientific concepts into literary narratives.
3. To explore the role of evolution in shaping plot and character development.
4. To investigate Wells's critique of social and ethical implications of Darwinism.
5. To assess the relevance of evolutionary thought in Wells's vision of the future.

Research Questions

1. How does Wells incorporate Darwinian theory into his literary works?
2. In what ways are evolutionary concepts reflected in his characters and plots?
3. How does Wells critique or reinterpret Darwinian ideas?
4. What social and ethical issues arise from this transformation?

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretative, and interdisciplinary research design to examine how the evolutionary ideas of Charles Darwin are transformed into literary expressions in the works of H. G. Wells. The methodology integrates literary analysis with theoretical insights from evolutionary biology and cultural studies.

Research Approach

The research is qualitative in nature, focusing on in-depth textual interpretation rather than numerical data. It follows an analytical and descriptive approach, enabling a close examination of themes, symbols, and narrative structures. The study also adopts an interdisciplinary perspective, combining literature, science, and philosophy to understand the broader implications of Darwinian thought.

Research Design

The study is designed as a thematic and textual analysis of selected literary works. It emphasizes how scientific ideas are embedded within fictional narratives. The design includes:

- ❖ Identification of key Darwinian concepts (natural selection, adaptation, survival struggle)
- ❖ Analysis of their representation in literary texts
- ❖ Interpretation of their influence on plot construction and character development

Sources of Data

a) Primary Sources

The primary data consists of selected novels by H. G. Wells, including:

- ❖ The Time Machine
- ❖ The Island of Doctor Moreau
- ❖ The War of the Worlds

These texts are chosen because they explicitly reflect evolutionary themes and scientific imagination.

b) Secondary Sources

Secondary data includes:

- ❖ Books and critical essays on Darwinism and literature
- ❖ Scholarly journal articles
- ❖ Literary criticism and theoretical writings by major scholars
- ❖ Historical and scientific texts related to Darwinian theory

Sampling Technique

The study uses purposive sampling, selecting texts that best represent the intersection of Darwinian theory and literary creativity. The chosen works are widely recognized for their engagement with evolutionary themes, making them appropriate for in-depth analysis.

Analytical Framework

The analysis is guided by the following frameworks:

- ❖ **Darwinian Evolutionary Theory:** Concepts such as natural selection, adaptation, and survival of the fittest are used to interpret narrative elements.
- ❖ **Thematic Analysis:** Identification of recurring themes like degeneration, mutation, and survival struggle.
- ❖ **Character Analysis:** Examination of how characters embody evolutionary principles (e.g., adaptation, regression, hybridity).
- ❖ **Narrative Analysis:** Study of plot development influenced by evolutionary conflict and environmental pressures.

Theoretical Framework: Reimagining Evolution through Literary Consciousness: This study is grounded in an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that re-conceptualizes evolutionary thought not merely as a biological doctrine but as a dynamic narrative force shaping literary imagination. The evolutionary principles articulated by Charles Darwin are treated here as discursive constructs that transcend science and enter the realm of cultural and textual production in the works of H. G. Wells.

- a) **Darwinian Evolution as Narrative Logic:** Rather than viewing Darwinism solely as a scientific theory, this framework positions it as a structural logic of storytelling. Concepts such as variation, adaptation, and natural selection are interpreted as narrative mechanisms that generate conflict, transformation, and resolution.
- b) **Evolutionary Subjectivity and the Fluid Self:** The framework re-conceptualizes character not as a fixed identity but as an evolving biological and psychological entity. Drawing on Darwinian insights, characters in Wells's works are analyzed as adaptive subjects shaped by their environments.
- c) **Social Darwinism and Power Structures:** The framework critically engages with Social Darwinism, examining how evolutionary ideas are appropriated to justify social hierarchies, class divisions, and imperial dominance.
- d) **Degeneration Theory and Evolutionary Anxiety:** Moving beyond progressivism interpretations of evolution, this framework incorporates degeneration theory, which suggests that evolution may lead to decline rather than advancement.
- e) **Science Fiction as Speculative Evolutionary Discourse:** The study situates Wells within the tradition of science fiction as a mode of speculative inquiry. Here, fiction becomes a laboratory of ideas, where evolutionary theories are tested, exaggerated, and reimaged.

- f) **Post humanism and Evolution Beyond Humanity:** Extending Darwinian thought into contemporary theory, this framework incorporates post humanist perspectives, which challenge the centrality of the human subject.

Analysis and Discussion

The works of H. G. Wells represent a profound literary engagement with the evolutionary ideas of Charles Darwin. Rather than merely reflecting scientific concepts, Wells actively transforms Darwinian principles into narrative structures, thematic concerns, and character formations. This section critically examines how evolutionary thought operates as a foundational force within Wells's fiction.

1. **Evolution as a Structural Principle of Plot:** One of the most significant ways in which Darwinian thought manifests in Wells's fiction is through plot construction. The narrative progression in his works mirrors the logic of evolution—marked by variation, struggle, and eventual transformation or extinction. In *The Time Machine*, the plot unfolds as a speculative projection of human evolution. The division between the Eloi and the Morlocks is not accidental but the result of prolonged environmental and social adaptation. The narrative thus reflects Darwin's principle of divergence, where species evolve differently under distinct conditions. Importantly, Wells challenges the notion of linear progress by depicting evolution as leading to degeneration rather than advancement.
2. **Evolutionary Dynamics in Character Construction:** In *The Time Machine*, the Eloi symbolize the consequences of excessive comfort and passivity, while the Morlocks represent the brutal adaptation to labor and darkness. Together, they illustrate a fractured humanity, suggesting that social inequalities can lead to biological divergence. This vision reflects a broader cultural anxiety about the future of human civilization. Evolution, in Wells's works, is not a guarantee of improvement but a process that may result in decline, fragmentation, and even extinction.
3. **Degeneration and Evolutionary Anxiety:** In *The Time Machine*, the Eloi symbolize the consequences of excessive comfort and passivity, while the Morlocks represent the brutal adaptation to labor and darkness. Together, they illustrate a fractured humanity, suggesting that social inequalities can lead to biological divergence. This vision reflects a broader cultural anxiety about the future of human civilization. Evolution, in Wells's works, is not a guarantee of improvement but a process that may result in decline, fragmentation, and even extinction.
4. **Social Darwinism and Critique of Power Structures:** In *The War of the Worlds*, the Martians' invasion mirrors European colonial practices. Humans, who have historically dominated other species and cultures, find themselves in the position of the colonized. This reversal exposes the moral and ethical contradictions of imperialism and challenges the assumption of human superiority. Thus, Wells uses Darwinian struggle as a lens to critique power, revealing that dominance is neither permanent nor justified but subject to the same evolutionary forces that govern all life.
5. **Science, Ethics, and the Limits of Evolutionary Intervention:** In *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, Dr. Moreau's experiments represent a radical form of artificial selection. His attempts to impose human characteristics on animals raise profound ethical questions about the limits of scientific authority. The eventual failure of his experiment underscores the dangers of ignoring

natural laws and the unpredictability of evolutionary processes. This narrative reflects contemporary concerns about the misuse of science and anticipates modern debates on genetic engineering and bioethics.

6. **Evolutionary Uncertainty and the Future of Humanity:** Wells's fiction consistently emphasizes the uncertainty of evolutionary outcomes. Unlike deterministic interpretations, his works suggest that the future is shaped by complex and often uncontrollable factors. The distant future depicted in *The Time Machine*—a dying Earth under a fading sun—presents a bleak vision of ultimate extinction. This reinforces the idea that evolution does not culminate in perfection but continues indefinitely, often leading to unforeseen consequences.

Major Findings

The major findings of the study are as under

1. The evolutionary ideas of Charles Darwin function as a core structural element in the fiction of H. G. Wells, shaping plot development through themes of struggle, adaptation, and survival.
2. Wells challenges the optimistic view of evolution by portraying it as a process that may lead to degeneration, fragmentation, and decline, as evident in works like *The Time Machine*.
3. Wells's characters embody evolutionary principles, demonstrating instinct-driven behavior, adaptability, and regression, particularly in *The Island of Doctor Moreau*.
4. The study finds that Wells critically interrogates the misuse of Darwinian ideas in justifying social inequality and imperial dominance, especially through the reversal of power in *The War of the Worlds*.
5. Wells emphasizes the unpredictability of evolution, presenting humanity as fragile and subject to extinction, thereby questioning the notion of human superiority and control over nature.

Conclusions

The study concludes that the evolutionary ideas of Charles Darwin profoundly shape the literary vision of H. G. Wells, transforming scientific theory into a powerful narrative and thematic framework. Wells reinterprets key concepts such as natural selection, adaptation, and survival, integrating them into plot construction and character development. His works challenge the conventional belief in evolutionary progress by presenting degeneration, uncertainty, and existential insecurity as possible outcomes. Furthermore, Wells critically examines the social implications of Darwinism, particularly its misuse in justifying class division and imperial dominance. Through speculative fiction, he highlights the ethical limits of scientific intervention and the fragile position of humanity within the broader evolutionary process. Ultimately, Wells's writings demonstrate that evolution is not merely a biological phenomenon but a complex force influencing human identity, society, and the uncertain future of civilization.

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