

A Study on Darwinian Evolution and Survival Instincts in the Fiction of H. G. Wells

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Abstract

This study examines the influence of Darwinian evolutionary theory on the narrative design and characterization in the fiction of H. G. Wells. Drawing on key texts such as *The Time Machine*, *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, and *The War of the Worlds*, the paper explores how concepts like natural selection, adaptation, and survival instinct shape both plot development and human behavior. It highlights Wells' portrayal of evolution as a complex and often unsettling process, marked by degeneration, conflict, and uncertainty. The analysis further reveals that Wells uses evolutionary ideas not only to imagine the future but also to critique social inequality and scientific ethics, offering a powerful reflection on the fragile position of humanity within the broader scheme of life.

1. Introduction

The closing decades of the nineteenth century witnessed a profound intellectual transformation with the rise of evolutionary theory, fundamentally altering how human existence and progress were understood. The ideas advanced by Charles Darwin disrupted long-held religious and philosophical assumptions by foregrounding natural selection, adaptation, and the ongoing struggle for survival as the driving forces of life. These scientific developments left a deep imprint on contemporary literature, particularly on the works of H. G. Wells, who engaged critically and imaginatively with the implications of evolutionary thought. His fiction transcends mere speculation, presenting unsettling visions of humanity shaped by biological forces, often marked by decline, instability, and conflict. This study aims to investigate the extent to which Darwinian principles inform the narrative design and characterization in Wells' major works. It explores how survival instincts influence individual and collective behavior, and how evolutionary dynamics are embedded within plot development. Additionally, the research examines Wells' nuanced critique of social Darwinism and unchecked scientific advancement. By bringing together literary analysis and evolutionary perspectives, the study demonstrates how Wells employs fiction as a powerful medium to interrogate the fragility, ethics, and future of human civilization.

Statement of the Problem

The rapid spread of evolutionary theory in the late nineteenth century significantly influenced literary imagination, yet its precise impact on narrative structure and characterization in the works of H. G. Wells remains insufficiently examined. While scholars have acknowledged the presence of Darwinian

ideas in Wells' fiction, there is a lack of focused analysis on how concepts such as natural selection, adaptation, and survival instinct actively shape the progression of plots and the psychological development of characters. In particular, the relationship between evolutionary struggle and human behavior in his narratives has not been systematically explored.

Moreover, existing studies often emphasize thematic interpretation without adequately addressing how Darwinian principles function as structural forces within the narrative framework. There is also ambiguity regarding whether Wells supports or critiques the implications of Charles Darwin's theory, especially in relation to social inequality, degeneration, and scientific ethics. Therefore, the problem addressed in this study is to critically investigate the extent to which Darwinian evolution and survival instincts influence both the narrative design and characterization in Wells' fiction, and to assess how these elements reflect broader concerns about the future of humanity.

The problem addressed in this study is:

- ❖ How Darwinian principles shape narrative conflicts in Wells' fiction
- ❖ How survival instincts determine character behavior and transformation
- ❖ Whether Wells supports or critiques Darwinian ideology through his works

Review of Literature

Bernard Bergonzi (1961), Patrick Parrinder (1995), and Brian Stableford (2000) observe that H. G. Wells presents humanity through a distinctly Darwinian framework influenced by Charles Darwin. Their studies highlight that Wells emphasizes biological struggle, adaptation, and survival as central forces shaping human existence. Through works like *The Time Machine* and *The War of the Worlds*, he portrays humans as vulnerable and subject to evolutionary pressures. The literature further suggests that Wells uses speculative scenarios to explore degeneration, transformation, and the uncertain future of humanity within an evolutionary context.

Research on **The Time Machine** by H. G. Wells highlights its deep engagement with Victorian scientific debates and evolutionary theory, particularly those influenced by Charles Darwin. Scholars such as **Patrick Parrinder (1995)** and **Bernard Bergonzi (1961)** argue that the novel reflects contemporary anxieties about degeneration, class division, and the long-term consequences of evolution. The division between the Eloi and Morlocks is often interpreted as a speculative outcome of social and biological evolution. Wells uses this framework to question the notion of linear progress, presenting instead a fragmented and uncertain evolutionary future shaped by scientific and social forces.

Scholars such as **Brian Stableford (2000), Patrick Parrinder (1995), and Darko Suvin (1979)** argue that H. G. Wells' fiction represents some of the earliest speculative narratives shaped by the evolutionary theories of Charles Darwin. Their studies highlight that Wells integrates scientific ideas of natural selection, adaptation, and extinction into imaginative future scenarios. Works such as *The Time Machine* depict the possible divergence and degeneration of the human species, reflecting anxieties about long-term evolutionary change. Scholars note that Wells moves beyond simple storytelling to construct narratives that question human permanence and superiority. His fiction frequently explores the

vulnerability of humanity when faced with environmental shifts or more advanced species. The literature further emphasizes that Wells' speculative imagination anticipates modern science fiction by presenting evolution as a dynamic and often unsettling force shaping the destiny of humankind.

A comparative body of scholarship demonstrates that H. G. Wells and his contemporaries were deeply influenced by the evolutionary theories of Charles Darwin, which significantly shaped early science fiction narratives. Critics such as **Brian Stableford (2000)**, **Darko Suvin (1979)**, and **Patrick Parrinder (1995)** highlight that Darwinism introduced themes of survival, adaptation, and extinction across the genre. In comparison with other writers like Jules Verne and Olaf Stapledon, Wells' fiction is more explicitly grounded in biological evolution and the struggle for existence. While Verne often emphasized technological adventure, Wells explored the long-term consequences of evolution on humanity. These comparative studies reveal that Darwinism provided a scientific framework through which early science fiction authors reimagined human destiny, survival, and the uncertainties of future evolution.

Studies on degeneration theory highlight that H. G. Wells presents evolution not as a linear path of progress but as a process that can lead to decline and regression. Influenced by late Victorian debates and the evolutionary ideas of Charles Darwin, Wells challenges optimistic views of human advancement. Scholars such as **Patrick Parrinder (1995)** and **Bernard Bergonzi (1961)** argue that works like *The Time Machine* depict a future where humanity has devolved into the Eloi and Morlocks, symbolizing physical and intellectual degeneration. This perspective reflects anxieties about industrialization, class division, and biological decline. The literature thus emphasizes that Wells reinterprets evolutionary theory by presenting it as unpredictable and potentially regressive, questioning the inevitability of human progress.

Literary Darwinism, as a critical approach, interprets literature through the lens of evolutionary theory, drawing on the ideas of Charles Darwin to analyze how narratives reflect fundamental human instincts such as survival, reproduction, and adaptation. Scholars like **Joseph Carroll (2004)** and **Jonathan Gottschall (2008)** argue that literary texts embody universal behavioral patterns shaped by evolution. In this framework, plots, characters, and conflicts are seen as extensions of biological drives and adaptive strategies. Applied to the works of H. G. Wells, this approach reveals how his narratives are structured around evolutionary struggle, environmental pressures, and the quest for survival, reinforcing the connection between literature and human evolutionary psychology.

Research on *The Island of Doctor Moreau* by H. G. Wells examines the ethical complexities of artificial evolution and the blurred boundary between humans and animals, drawing on the evolutionary ideas of Charles Darwin. Scholars such as **Patrick Parrinder (1995)** and **Brian Stableford (2000)** argue that the novel critiques scientific experimentation that seeks to manipulate natural processes. Through the figure of Dr. Moreau, Wells raises questions about morality, identity, and the limits of human control over nature. The transformation of animals into human-like beings highlights anxieties about degeneration, hybridity, and the instability of civilized behavior. This body of research emphasizes that Wells uses the narrative to challenge rigid distinctions between human and animal, exposing the ethical risks inherent in attempts to artificially direct evolution.

Studies on *The War of the Worlds* by H. G. Wells interpret the alien invasion as a powerful inversion of colonial Darwinism, influenced by the evolutionary ideas of Charles Darwin. Scholars such as **Patrick Parrinder (1995)** and **John Rieder (2008)** argue that the novel reverses imperial hierarchies by portraying technologically superior Martians dominating humans, much like European colonial powers subdued other societies. This reversal positions humans as the weaker species, subject to the same processes of natural selection and extinction they once imposed on others. The narrative thus critiques imperialist ideology and anthropocentric assumptions of superiority. Through this framework, Wells exposes the fragility of human dominance and highlights evolution as an impartial force governing all species.

Critical essays on H. G. Wells argue that his fiction challenges the conventional notion of linear and progressive evolution associated with Charles Darwin. Scholars such as **Patrick Parrinder (1995)**, **Brian Stableford (2000)**, and **Gillian Beer (1983)** contend that Wells presents evolution as fragmented, unpredictable, and often regressive. In works like *The Time Machine*, the future of humanity is depicted as divided and deteriorating rather than advancing, undermining the idea of inevitable progress. These studies emphasize that Wells uses speculative fiction to expose the instability of evolutionary outcomes, reflecting contemporary anxieties about science, society, and the limits of human development.

Studies in evolution and literature confirm that H. G. Wells explores the darker implications of Darwinian struggle and survival, drawing on the evolutionary principles of Charles Darwin. Scholars such as **Brian Stableford (2000)**, **Patrick Parrinder (1995)**, and **Darko Suvin (1979)** argue that Wells' major works depict evolution as a harsh and often destructive process. His narratives highlight themes of degeneration, extinction, and the vulnerability of humanity when confronted with superior species or changing environments. Rather than celebrating progress, Wells emphasizes the instability and uncertainty of survival. These studies suggest that his fiction serves as a critique of optimistic interpretations of Darwinism, revealing its potential to produce conflict, inequality, and existential insecurity.

Objectives of the study

The Objectives of the study as under

- a) To analyze the influence of Darwinian theory in Wells' fiction
- b) To examine survival instincts in shaping characters
- c) To study evolutionary themes in plot construction
- d) To explore degeneration and transformation in Wells' narratives
- e) To evaluate Wells' critique of social Darwinism

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, analytical, and interpretative methodology:

a) Primary Sources

- ❖ *The Time Machine*

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

b) **Secondary Sources:** Books, journal articles, and research papers on Darwinism and literary criticism

Theoretical Framework

The study is based on

- a) **Darwin's Theory of Natural Selection** The foundation of this study is based on the evolutionary theory proposed by Charles Darwin. The concept of natural selection explains how organisms evolve through adaptation to their environment, where only the fit survive and reproduce. In the context of H. G. Wells' fiction, this principle is reflected in the struggle between species, environments, and social groups. Wells transforms this biological theory into narrative conflict, where survival becomes the central driving force of both plot and character behavior.
- b) **Concept of Survival of the Fittest and Social Darwinism:** The idea of "survival of the fittest," closely associated with Darwinian thought, extends into social and cultural domains as Social Darwinism. This framework is used to analyze how power, class division, and dominance operate in Wells' works. His narratives often depict unequal societies and hierarchical structures, where stronger groups dominate weaker ones. However, Wells simultaneously critiques this ideology by exposing its ethical limitations and consequences, especially in terms of exploitation and dehumanization.
- c) **Literary Darwinism as a Critical Approach:** The study also employs Literary Darwinism, which interprets literature through evolutionary principles such as adaptation, competition, and human instincts. This approach helps in examining how characters in Wells' fiction act according to primal survival drives and environmental pressures. It also enables an understanding of narrative patterns as reflections of evolutionary struggle, thereby linking biological theory with literary expression in a systematic and analytical manner.

Analysis and Discussion

The fiction of H. G. Wells offers a rich literary space where evolutionary theory is transformed into narrative action, character conflict, and philosophical inquiry. Drawing upon the ideas of Charles Darwin, Wells not only incorporates biological evolution into his storytelling but also interrogates its social and ethical implications.

- a) **Darwinian Evolution as a Narrative Force:** Wells structures his plots around evolutionary tension and transformation. In *The Time Machine*, the division of humanity into the Eloi and Morlocks represents divergent evolutionary paths shaped by environment and class conditions. Similarly, *The War of the Worlds* presents a reversal of evolutionary dominance, where humans—once the dominant species—are rendered vulnerable before technologically superior Martians. In *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, artificial manipulation of evolution leads to

instability, suggesting that interference with natural processes results in chaos. Thus, evolution becomes the central mechanism driving conflict and plot progression.

- b) **Survival Instincts and Character Behavior** Characters in Wells' fiction are deeply influenced by survival instincts, reflecting Darwinian principles of adaptation and struggle. The Time Traveller adapts to an unfamiliar future world, relying on intelligence and resilience. Edward Prendick in *The Island of Doctor Moreau* struggles to maintain his humanity while surrounded by hybrid creatures, highlighting the thin boundary between civilization and savagery. In *The War of the Worlds*, ordinary individuals are reduced to primal survival responses, emphasizing fear, flight, and instinct over rationality. These portrayals demonstrate that under extreme conditions, human behavior regresses to basic survival mechanisms.
- c) **Degeneration and Evolutionary Anxiety:** A significant aspect of Wells' work is his challenge to the optimistic view of evolution as continuous progress. Instead, he presents evolution as a process that may lead to degeneration. The Eloi symbolize intellectual and physical decline, living in passive dependence, while the Morlocks represent a more adapted yet morally diminished species. The Beast People in *The Island of Doctor Moreau* further illustrate failed evolution, as they oscillate between human and animal states. This reflects late Victorian anxieties about the future of humanity, suggesting that progress is neither linear nor guaranteed.
- d) **Critique of Social Darwinism:** Wells critically engages with the concept of Social Darwinism by exposing its dangers. In *The Time Machine*, the division between Eloi and Morlocks mirrors class exploitation during the industrial era, implying that social inequality may lead to biological divergence. *The War of the Worlds* reverses colonial logic by placing humans in the position of the colonized, thereby questioning imperialist assumptions of superiority. Through *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, Wells critiques scientific arrogance and the ethical consequences of treating life as subject to experimentation. These narratives reveal Wells' skepticism toward applying Darwinian ideas uncritically to society.
- e) **Human Identity and Existential Uncertainty:** Wells' exploration of Darwinism ultimately raises profound questions about human identity. If humans are subject to the same evolutionary forces as other species, their position in the universe becomes uncertain. His works suggest that intelligence, morality, and civilization are fragile constructs rather than fixed attributes. The constant threat of extinction or transformation underscores a deep existential anxiety, making survival not only a physical struggle but also a philosophical concern.

Findings

The major outline of the findings is as under

- a) The study finds that the evolutionary ideas of Charles Darwin form the intellectual backbone of Wells' fiction. Concepts such as natural selection, adaptation, and struggle for existence are deeply embedded in both narrative design and thematic concerns.
- b) Darwinian evolution is not merely a theme but a structural force shaping the plots. Conflicts, settings, and outcomes in works like *The Time Machine* and *The War of the Worlds* are driven by evolutionary pressures and environmental challenges.
- c) Characters consistently exhibit strong survival instincts, especially in hostile or unfamiliar environments. Their actions are guided more by adaptation and self-preservation than by moral or social norms, reflecting core Darwinian principles.

- d) The study reveals that Wells challenges the notion of continuous progress by portraying evolution as potentially degenerative. The division of species and the decline of human qualities indicate that evolution can lead to regression as much as advancement.
- e) Wells does not fully endorse Social Darwinism; instead, he critically examines its implications. His works highlight the dangers of applying biological theories to justify social inequality, class division, and imperial dominance.
- f) The research finds that Wells frequently dissolves the distinction between human and animal identities, especially in *The Island of Doctor Moreau*. This reflects the Darwinian idea that humans are part of the same evolutionary continuum as other species.
- g) Wells' fiction expresses deep anxiety about the future of humanity. Evolution is depicted as unpredictable, raising fears of extinction, transformation, or loss of human identity.
- h) The study highlights Wells' concern with the ethical implications of scientific experimentation. He questions the moral responsibility of scientists when manipulating life and evolutionary processes.
- i) In works like *The War of the Worlds*, Wells reverses traditional hierarchies by portraying humans as weak and vulnerable, thereby challenging assumptions of superiority and dominance.
- j) Finally, the study finds that Wells successfully integrates scientific theory with literary creativity. His works demonstrate how fiction can serve as a medium to interpret, critique, and popularize complex scientific ideas.

Conclusions

The study reveals that the fiction of H. G. Wells is deeply informed by the evolutionary ideas of Charles Darwin, which he reimagines within a literary framework. Rather than merely incorporating scientific concepts, Wells reshapes principles such as natural selection, adaptation, and survival into dynamic narrative forces that guide both plot development and character formation. His works suggest that evolution is neither linear nor inherently progressive; instead, it unfolds as an unpredictable process capable of producing decline, conflict, and uncertainty. Moreover, Wells interrogates the broader social and ethical consequences of evolutionary thinking, particularly in relation to class inequality, imperial dominance, and the limits of scientific intervention. Through this critical engagement, his fiction highlights the precarious nature of human existence and challenges assumptions of human supremacy, presenting evolution as a dual force that is both generative and destructive in shaping the future of life.

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