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Time and Space, Truth and Fiction
in the Works of H. G. Wells and Henry James

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Abstract

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A number of scientific and technological innovations that came about during the nineteenth century had a resounding effect on Victorian culture. The advent of the railway along with the introduction of new communications media and radical biological and geological discoveries had major implications for western society's understanding of the relationship between space and time and of humanity's role within that relationship. As time and space were expanded, the speed at which they could be experienced caused them to be simultaneously annihilated, greatly increasing the number of impressions – and the amount of experience – an individual could acquire. By the 1890s, the effects of this phenomenon had become some of the most widely discussed topics in a multitude of cultural discourses, and since, as H. Porter Abbott writes in the *Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, "the representation of conflict in narrative provides a way for a culture to talk to itself about, and possibly resolve, conflicts that threaten to fracture it (or at least making living difficult)," the literature produced during the last decade of the century exemplifies the extent to which these changes influenced society on both individual and collective levels.[1] This thesis focuses on two works by Henry James – *The Turn of the Screw* and *In the Cage*, both published in 1898 – as well as H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine*, published in 1895. Shortly after these works were introduced into Victorian culture, James and Wells became involved in a lifelong quarrel regarding the purpose of the novel: Wells adeptly explained it in a 1915 letter to James when he stated, "to you literature like painting is an end, to me literature like architecture is a means, it has a use."[2] Despite their differences – as Wells confessed, "I had a queer feeling that we were both incompatibly right" – both authors address the newly-realized ambiguity of the relationships between time and space, truth and fiction, man and machine.[3]

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[1] *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008 (p. 55).
[2] "July 8, 1915 letter to Henry James" found in Leon Edel and Gordon Ray's *Henry James and H.G. Wells: A Record of their Friendship, their Debate on the Art of Fiction, and their Quarrel*. Rupert Hart-Davis: London, 1958. (p. 264).
[3] *Experiment in Autobiography*, New York: The MacMillan Company, 1934. (p. 414).

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Acknowledgements

As H. G. Wells confesses in his *Experiment in Autobiography: Discoveries and Conclusions of a Very Ordinary Brain*: "the brain upon which my experiences have been written is not a particularly good one. If there were brain-shows, as there are cat and dog shows, I doubt if it would get even a third class prize".[4] Even with his 'nothing-special' noggin, though, Wells managed to capture the essence of his experiences in Victorian society to create some of the most fascinating and widely-read works in science fiction to this day. I think that his success as a novelist can be boiled down to his commitment to being, in the words of Henry James, "one of the people on whom nothing is lost".[5] (Although Wells would roll over in his grave if he knew I was associating his style with James's ideas about fiction.) This project is the child of my own bronze-medal brain and my attempt to be one of those people whose simple dedication to observing the world around them gives them the tools to imagine, to create, to fill in the gaps and throw open vistas.

Of course, impressions come from somewhere – from everywhere – and I am grateful for all of the people and circumstances that have helped me to acquire the ones which comprise this thesis. Thank you, Laura Otis, for taking me in when I was a homeless honors student with nothing more than a bundle of vague ideas. Thank you, Rachel Bowser, for helping me to the realization that girls from western Pennsylvania can have their Yuengling and drink it too. Thank you to my friends, especially Alex, Paul, and John, who have continually expressed – or at least feigned – interest in my project and its progress. Finally, thank you, Mom and Dad, for absolutely everything. If I listed all the ways you've helped me get here no one would ever even make it to the Introduction.

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[4]Wells's autobiography was published in 1934.
[5] from "The Art of Fiction," an 1884 essay encouraging novelists to exercise freedom in form and content.

Table of Contents

Introduction

We live in a world of invisible information. Every second it zips by us – above our heads, under our feet, and through our very bodies – as 1s and 0s, waves and lines, lights and sounds. Our experiences are made up of both tangible and intangible components, as are the ways in which we communicate them. Media theorist Marshall McLuhan described media as "extensions of man," arguing that media's effect on society is as important to consider as is the content that those media carry. McLuhan's idea that "the medium *is* the message" has had a lasting impact on various aspects of culture, from the arts to the sciences, since it was introduced in 1964 – particularly those that focus on human experience and the communication thereof. Roland Barthes writes that narrative, which is present in almost all human discourse, is:

> Able to be carried by articulated language, spoken or written, fixed or moving images, gestures, and the ordered mixture of all these substances; narrative is present in myth, legend, fable, tale, novella, epic, history, tragedy, drama, comedy, mime, painting (think of Carpaccio's *Saint Ursula*), stained-glass windows, cinema, comics, news items, conversation. Moreover, under this almost infinite diversity of forms, narrative is present in every age, in every place, in every society; it begins with the very history of mankind and there nowhere is nor has been a people without narrative (Barthes 251).

In all its forms, narrative is an integral part of human existence, as are the media through which it is recorded and presented. Art, life, and technology have been interconnected and have influenced each other throughout history, and the basis for McLuhan's

argument in the mid-twentieth century is apparent a hundred years earlier in the narrative

media and messages of England's Victorian era.

In his *Experiment in Autobiography*, H.G. Wells writes that he "set out to write

novels...on the assumption that problems of adjustment were the essential matter for

novel writing" (*Experiment* 410). During the late Victorian era in Great Britain, Wells

certainly had a plethora of such problems to work with. The period was characterized by

several of what Thomas Kuhn would call 'paradigm shifts' – changes in the basic

assumptions that constitute the dominant theories of science, technology, and society that

in turn changed how and what people understood to constitute experience. These shifts

were brought about in large part by an influx of new ideas, innovative inventions, and

emergent changes in the national class system. As science challenged traditional

religious notions of the history of the world, telegraphy became favorable to the written

word and the railway changed how people experienced their surroundings. The

widespread effect of these transitions was the result of their interaction with one another

and infiltration into every aspect of Victorian culture, and its resulting power provided, as

Wells suggested, "problems of adjustment."

These problems, and the impressions they created within British society,

contributed heavily to H.G. Wells's version of humanity as it is related in *The Time*

Machine. As Marina Warner notes in her foreword to the Penguin classics version of the

text, the novel grew out of

> two powerful tendencies in Victorian science: first, the Victorians' passion
>
> for machines of all kinds, which led them to export inventions, from
>
> cameras to cables, all over the world, and secondly, the continuing post-

Darwinian argument about survival, about individualism versus

collectivism, and the consequent conflict between post-Romantic views of

the single person, and Socialist or Universalist ideals of community and

ecology (Warner xxiii).

In less than one hundred pages, Wells creates 'an ordered mixture of substances' as he

draws from a variety of cultural discourses. In its weaving together of everything from

economics to art, biology to ethics, the novella both *shows* and *is* the effects of those

paradigm shifts that characterize the Victorian period.

Perhaps more significant to Wells's text (and to members of Victorian society)

than the steam engines, cameras and cables they exported were those machines that made

it possible for them to do so – an idea which is supported by his naming the novella after

such an object, albeit fictional. While no inventor actually created a time machine like

that which propels the story's protagonist hundreds of thousands of years into the future,

new transportation technologies did allow for an unprecedented manipulation of time and

space. The effect of railway travel in particular has been characterized as an

"annihilation of space and time" by historian Wolfgang Schivelbusch in *The Railway*

Journey (Schivelbusch 31). According to Schivelbusch, "the concept is based on the

speed that the new means of transport is able to achieve. A given spatial distance, to be

covered, traditionally, in a fixed duration of travel or transport time, can suddenly be

dealt with in a fraction of that time" (Schivelbusch 31). However, this shrinkage of time

and space was simultaneous with their expansion; "the dialectic of this process states that

the diminution, i.e. the temporal shrinking of transportation, causes the expansion of

transport space" (Schivelbusch 33). The loss of 'in-between' space resulted in a growth

of the number of places that it was possible to experience within any range of time, and this dual nature of the technology resulted in a tremendous change in what – and how – things were impressed upon individuals.

The expansion of the railroad throughout western Europe was only one aspect of the paradigm shift in the experience of time and space that occurred during the nineteenth century in England. The introduction of an array of new communications media and technology – photographic technology and the electric telegraph in the late 1830s, film and the phonograph in the 1870s, and the radio (or 'wireless telegraph') in the early 1890s – had a similar effect on the population. New means of experience necessitated a shift in the means of representing experience. It became, as Walter Benjamin called it, an Age of Mechanical Reproduction. Benjamin explains that

> during long periods of history, the mode of human sense perception changes with humanity's entire mode of existence. The manner in which human sense perception is organized, the medium in which it is accomplished, is determined not only by nature but by historical circumstances as well (Benjamin 4).

He elaborates on this musing with the suggestion that the changes which came about during the so-called Mechanical Age "can be comprehended as decay of the aura" – the phenomenon of spatial distance – which rests on the "desire of contemporary masses to bring things 'closer' spatially and humanly" (Benjamin 4). This desire for a reduction of 'in-between' space did not exist before the development of the railway made society aware of its existence. Schivelbusch notes that "the detaching of the landscape from its original isolation, its opening-up by the railroad, can well be defined as a loss of its aura,

considering how Benjamin characterizes the aura and its loss in his essay" (Schivelbusch 37). The effect of the railway that Schivelbusch describes is similar to the media of mechanical reproduction that are the foci of Benjamin's essay and the subject matter of Friedrich Kittler's *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*. In the foreword to that book, David E. Wellbery compares Kittler's ideas about the historical significance of mechanical and technological media to Benjamin's, calling the emergence of these new technologies representative of "a decisive historical and discursive caesura that alters the structure, placement, and function of cultural production" (Kittler xxxi). According to Kittler, the impact of this change was such that "what once necessarily escaped becomes inescapable; the bodiless becomes material" (Kittler 236). Various types of sensory data could be recorded and reproduced in entirely different ways that were more detailed and more efficient than ever before. Marshall McLuhan wrote of the typewriter that it "fuses composition and publication, causing an entirely new attitude to the written and printed word" (McLuhan 279). Benjamin writes that the photograph accelerated the "process of pictorial representation…so enormously that it could keep pace with speech," and Kittler comments on the ability of the gramophone to capture "the murmuring and whispering of unconscious oracles" that had previously gone unrecorded (Benjamin 2, Kittler 230). Benjamin's argument that "every day the urge grows stronger to get hold of an object at very close range by the way of its likeness" is well supported by the practically coincident appearance of these revolutionary media with the railway's space/time annihilation (Benjamin 5).

These new methods of representation did not simply replace those that preexisted them; rather, they entered into dialogue with and within them. The gramophone, film,

and typewriter are media that could modify – and, some would argue, improve upon – how experiences had previously been conveyed; however, in order to remain true to human experience in their representations of it, they had to be combined in narrative. Literature provided an ideal outlet for such a fusion of sensory information. Novelists in particular sought to create work that would both address and include new narrative media.

Perhaps the biggest difference between the novel and earlier literary forms is the genre's rejection of what Ian Watt calls "literary traditionalism" (Watt 13). Watt provides the example of classical epics, which "were based on past history or fable, and the merits of the author's treatment were judged largely according to a view of literary decorum derived from the accepted models of the genre" (Watt 13). The primary criterion of the novel, by contrast, "was truth to individual experience – individual experience which is always unique and therefore new" (Watt 13). During the Victorian era, individual experience and artistic representations thereof were comprised of various types of sensory data acquired through various media. The evolution of British culture facilitated this change as much as it was informed by it; and so, too, is the dual role of human experience apparent both in and on the cultural productions of the period. By the end of the nineteenth century, the English novel provided a detailed and telling impression of Victorian life.

While the novel mirrored other narrative forms in the way it represented life, it also included them under the umbrella of the experience it sought to represent. Through developments in science, technology, art, and history, new ideas and new technologies took hold of British culture during the Victorian era, and their influence on and inclusion

in the fiction of the period provides readers with a great deal of insight into the workings of that society. "As the picture is reality, so the novel is history," wrote Henry James in 1884; and the novel's potential to entertain a number of perspectives through its unique capacity to manipulate space and time allows it to be regarded "both as the document and as the agency of cultural history" (James 2, *Desire* 23). The novels published during the late Victorian era, in particular, stand out as both documents and agents of cultural history through which the British culture can "talk to itself about, and possibly resolve, conflicts that threaten to fracture it (or at least make living difficult)" (Abbott 55).

This statement applies to story in the myriad forms through which it has been presented over time. From the oral tradition to poetry and the novel, conflict is and always has been an essential component of narrative and an inevitably influential force on society. Its importance to culture can be seen throughout history in the productions that have constituted and shaped culture over time – particularly in literature, and most apparently since the rise of the English novel during the eighteenth century. Under the reign of Queen Victoria, which lasted from 1837 until her death in 1901, the population of England doubled in size and became highly centralized and stratified. Society experienced a second Industrial Revolution that necessitated a large working class in the nation's cities in order to maintain the sense of prosperity that had come to characterize the extensive British Empire. Meanwhile, the novel flourished as writers found themselves with larger markets and an influx of new experiences from which to draw their inspiration.

In addition to changes in England's social infrastructure, a number of major discoveries and inventions during the nineteenth century affected how and what was

understood to constitute human experience. From Lyell's application of stratigraphy to the advent of the railway, scientific and technologic innovations resulted in a 'paradigm shift', and as the seemingly familiar elements of human experience turned uncanny with the introduction of new ideas about the Earth and its inhabitants, from evolution theory to thermodynamic entropy, literature changed to envelop this transition. The complexity of the world and the individual's role in it were apparent sources of conflict in British society by the end of the nineteenth century, as is evidenced by the literature produced by and for Victorians in the years leading up to the *fin de siècle*. H. G. Wells's introduction of the 'scientific romance' exemplifies how both human experience and cultural representations thereof were influenced by the multitude of social, scientific, and technological changes that characterized the Victorian era – all of which are present in *The Time Machine*.

The end of the nineteenth century, coincident with the final years of Queen Victoria's 63-year reign, was the backdrop for *The Time Machine* and an era of "hitherto unparalleled scientific discoveries and mechanical inventions which accompanied the spreading Industrial Revolution [and] overseas expansion…Steam and the railway age abridged space, economized time, and added in many ways to the material comforts of life" (Fay 237). The new "material comforts" associated with the innovations of the late nineteenth century were provided by the western world's growing network of faster and more widespread transportation technology; this network supported and intersected a similar system of communications media which acted as vehicles for information rather than objects. From gramophone to telegraph, photograph to typewriter, an avalanche of innovations in the communication of experiences and impressions were developed and

spread throughout Victorian society, creating "a climate of excited possibility: if images and sounds could be moved over great distances, might it not be imaginable to move thoughts and objects as well?" (Warner, *Time* xx). The expansion of the railway and telegraph systems across the European continent had already begun to answer this question in the affirmative by the late nineteenth century, and its speed and influence were difficult for the vast majority of society to comprehend. These and other technologies made it possible for objects, ideas, and individuals to move about in space in ways that were completely unprecedented; they facilitated a shift from visible, tangible media and messages to intangible, invisible ones. As Friedrich Kittler writes in *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*, "the ability to record sense data technologically shifted the entire discourse network circa 1900…the technological recordings of the real entered into competition with the symbolic registration of the Symbolic" (Kittler 229). In Wells's novel, the Time Traveller's 'real' Time Machine and the 'real' experiences it allows him to have compete with – and maybe even outdo – any 'symbolic' ideas about the experience of Time.

Just as the boundaries between the real and the symbolic began to break down with the technological developments that changed the discourse network of the late nineteenth century, Wells saw the distinction between fiction and non-fiction begin to blur towards the end of the Victorian era. As Patrick Parrinder points out, Wells's "bestselling historical works *The Outline of History* (1920) and *A Short History of the World* (1922) break with historical conventions by looking forward to the next stage in history…Wells saw history as a 'race between education and catastrophe'" (Parrinder xi). *The Time Machine* also looks forward – to a fictional world, but with a hauntingly

relevant social message. While Henry James believed that "the novel is history," Wells's

understanding was that the novel could be used as a tool to change history. Wells's novel

was a way to educate; James's was a way to illuminate; and as Wells confides in his

autobiography, "I had a queer feeling that we were both incompatibly right" (*Experiment*

414).

1. The Art(s) of Fiction

Wells never thought of himself as an artist. In a 1915 letter he admitted to Henry James: "I had rather be called a journalist…that is the essence of it" (Edel 264). His first foray into the art of fiction, which would become *The Time Machine* in 1895, "was begotten in the writer's mind by students' discussions in the laboratories and debating society of the Royal College of Science in the [eighteen] eighties and already it had been tried over in various forms by him before he made this particular application of it" (*Time* 94). Before it was the first-ever 'scientific romance' – before it threatened to splinter the frame in which the English Novel had been invented and kept – it was an idea that came to the author through his studies, his politics, and his temperament. As literary critic Leon Edel writes, "Wells's scientific training, combined with his need for self-assertion, made him an exponent of a materialistic kind of artistry…Wells could not for long accept beauty and art as ends in themselves" (Edel 18). In this way, he differed from the majority of his peers; to James, Wells explains, "To you literature like painting is an end, to me literature like architecture is a means, it has a use" (Edel 264). An admirable application of the art of fiction was never Wells's ultimate goal; to the contrary, he "was disposed to regard a novel as about as much an art form as a market place or a boulevard. It had not even necessarily to get anywhere. You went by it on your various occasions" (*Experiment* 411). The novel was a path by which the author might "subordinate his art to his social message," and its artistic quality meant nothing to Wells if it did not successfully communicate that message (Edel 11). As Frank McConnell writes, though, in spite of Wells's opinion of art as a means rather than an end,

> when he was writing at the top of his form, that is great art indeed. Through a
>
> combination of historical moment and personal strategy, he transformed the

scientific and social controversy of his time into an extended fable of apocalypse

and terror that is sometimes grim and sometimes ennobling in its vision of the

human condition, but always compelling and crafted with immense skill

(McConnell 7).

H. G. Wells's use of the novel as a social tool and his preference for objective, scientific

thought were equally uncommon among novelists of the late Victorian era. His logical approach

to writing literature distinguished him from his predecessors and contemporaries – among whom

Henry James had long been considered an accomplished novelist and critic with a formative role

in what the field had become – and his work was a major source of controversy towards the end

of the nineteenth century in England. He knew that his style was unconventional and did not

apologize for it. In his *Experiment in Autobiography*, Wells writes:

> Throughout the broad smooth flow of nineteenth century life in Great Britain, the
>
> art of fiction floated on the assumption of social fixity. The Novel in English was
>
> produced in an atmosphere of security for the entertainment of secure people who
>
> liked to feel established and safe for good. Its standards were established within
>
> that apparently permanent frame and the criticism of it began to be irritated and
>
> perplexed when, through a new instability, the splintering frame began to get into
>
> the picture.
>
> I suppose for a time I was the outstanding instance among writers of
>
> fiction in English of the frame getting into the picture (*Experiment* 416).

The "new instability" Wells refers to was the product of the changing class system that

characterized the Victorian period. Those "secure" people of the upper and upper-middle classes

– the "picture" of and for whom fiction had long been created – were no longer its only audience

and subjects. Members of the growing lower-middle class (and even some workers) were

gaining influence and access to cultural elements that were new to them. Wells, who came from

a lower class family of suburban London, was a living example of this change. For the novel to

remain relevant as a means for Victorian society to talk to itself about itself, people like Wells

had to become a more prominent part of fiction: to put the matter in terms of Thomas Hardy's

famous novel, the D'Urbervilles of Victorian literature gradually began to take a backseat to the

Durbeyfields. In 1884, author and critic Henry James had written that while expectations that

fictional productions "shall be in some degree apologetic – shall renounce the pretension of

attempting really to compete with life…the only reason for the existence of a novel is that it *does*

compete with life" (James 1-2). By the time Wells's first novel, *The Time Machine*, was

published in 1895, the novelist could not ignore the fact that the experiences that constituted

middle-class life in England were, for the majority of the population, that "life" with which his

work might enter into competition.

      As Marina Warner explains in her introduction to *The Time Machine*, "[Wells's] favored

locale is the leafy suburbs around London, his favored milieu ordinary people of the middle to

lower middle class, and his discourse by choice matter-of-fact, objective and scientific" (*Time*

xix). As a novelist, Wells aimed to produce narrative that was true to human experience, and he

held his work to the obligation that James believed was essential, "that it be interesting."

However, the list of commonalities between the two authors ends here. The number of their

differences – and their conflicting interests – is far greater than that of their similarities.

      H. G. Wells and Henry James had much to say about each other's work, from the time

that Wells's idea of fiction was manifest in the form of *The Time Machine* until their deaths:

James's in 1916 and Wells's in 1946. James's first novel was published when Wells was just

five years old, and by the time Wells began to dabble in the art of fiction. James's work and theory had become hugely influential among both writers and readers of literature. Wells's use of the novel form troubled James deeply; as Wells writes, "he liked me and he found my work respectable enough to be greatly distressed by it…we were at cross purposes based on very fundamental differences, not only of temperament but of training" (*Experiment* 410). James was one of those authors who worked within the "apparently permanent" frame that Wells desired to splinter, and as Wells candidly states in his autobiography, "I bothered him and he bothered me" (*Experiment* 410).

Wells is widely regarded as the inventor of the 'scientific romance.' This genre, which was a hybrid of philosophical tale and adventure novel with its source of conflict rooted in some unforeseen technological or scientific development, was completely new to English literature and was a product of the countless innovations introduced into Victorian society, from the steam engine to the electromagnetic spectrum, and the cultural and societal changes they caused during the second half of the nineteenth century. New jobs, industries, and lifestyles came into being with these new ideas and technologies, and as life changed, the art that competed with it changed as well.

Leon Edel, James's biographer and the editor of Wells's and James's correspondence, writes that the disparity between Wells's and James's work stemmed from the fact that they led two very different lives. Wells, an outspoken socialist from the London suburb of Bromley who grew up in a working-class family, "believed in 'la littérature engagée,' a useable, functional art appropriate to the new world [the socialists] wished to fashion out of the old" (Edel 11). James, on the other hand, was the type of dedicated artist "for whom art is the only valid means of encompassing and preserving human experience" (Edel 11). According to Edel:

> James wanted art to be neither consciously prophetic nor self-consciously
> didactic. There was enough for the artist to do in the act of seeing, feeling,
> arriving at awareness – and creating from this awareness – without making of his
> creations instruments for social instruction and guidance (Edel 11).

Wells, who had studied biology at the Normal School of Science as a young man, created work that was reflective of his social and educational backgrounds while attaching less importance to the forms his ideas took than to the ideas themselves. Of James, however, Wells reflects that "one could not be in a room with him for ten minutes without realizing the importance he attached to the dignity of this art of his. I was by nature and education unsympathetic with this mental disposition" (*Experiment* 411). As they both would readily admit, the two authors represent two very distinct formulae for fiction. As Frank McConnell writes, "Wells argued in favor of ideas and social commitment, while James made the Art of the novel (with a capital A) his cause" (McConnell ix).   The variation between their theory and the application thereof is telling of the variation between their ways of life, which were, like their ideas about literature, irreconcilable. Wells writes that the incompatibility of their differences was "an issue that exercised my mind considerably" (*Experiment* 414). The two authors, it seemed, experienced the paradigm shifts in science and technology in very different ways – and both of those ways were 'right'.

2. *The Time Machine:* An Experiment in Fiction

The Time Machine is Wells's first big experiment in fiction, and his formula fully

manifests itself in the text. The novella, a fantastic tale about an inventor's journey 800,000

years into the future, is packed with layers of the history, culture, and social issues of nineteenth-

century Victorian England. It is a story within a story: the framing story is told by a nameless

first-person narrator who, together with a group of peers, takes in the framed tale told by the

Traveller. In a sense, the weaving together of two narratives within a single novel makes *The*

Time Machine an example of how Wells's "splintering frame began to get into the picture"

(*Experiment* 416). H. Porter Abbott writes that "narrative is the principal way in which our

species organizes its understanding of time," and by fusing the embedding and embedded tales

into one Wells creates a work of fiction that is true to the complicatedly simultaneous expansion

and diminution of time and space that occurred in the minds of British citizens as a result of

discoveries in geology and biology alongside the expansion of the railway system (Abbott 3).

The infusion of the familiar – those leafy suburbs and cozy smoking rooms where his

stories are introduced – with uncanny phenomena such as time travel – is essential to Wells's

work in fiction. Warner quotes Wells's explanation for this particular combination:

> Wells explained his technique: 'For the writer of fantastic stories to help the
>
> reader play the game properly, he must help him in every possible unobtrusive
>
> way to *domesticate* the impossible hypothesis. He must trick him into an unwary
>
> concession to get some plausible assumption and get on with the story while the
>
> illusion holds' (*Time* xxi).

Wells most literally does "domesticate" the uncanny in *The Time Machine*: the Time Traveller

embarks on his journey into the future without ever definitively leaving his laboratory, making

his great adventure seem nearly as close and real as the room where his friends receive the story.

He recounts to his audience that, upon his 'departure,'

> 'The laboratory grew faint and hazy, then fainter and even fainter…the dim
>
> suggestion of the laboratory seemed presently to fall away from me, and I saw the
>
> sun hopping swiftly across the sky, leaping it every minute, and every minute
>
> marking a day. I suppose the laboratory had been destroyed and I had come into
>
> the open air' (*Time* 21).

Furthermore, like the passengers in a railway car, neither the Time Traveller's audience nor the

reader need leave their seats to "domesticate the impossible hypothesis" that the Time Traveller

presents: it is all contained within the scope of the narrative. The future is fused with the past

and present as the Time Traveller launches into his tale, engaging all parties in the process of

domestication and producing what critic Elana Gomel calls the "time travel chronotope" (Gomel

335). Gomel borrows the word used by Mikhail Bakhtin to refer to a particular form of "the

intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in

literature" which "represents history as a frozen space-time continuum, in which the future is as

determined and immutable as the past" (Bakhtin 15, Gomel 335). The deterministic time travel

chronotope, as identified by Gomel, is what allows the author to "trick" the reader and then,

when the "illusion" is in place, to "get on with the story."

For H. G. Wells, an objective and scientific thinker both by nature and by training, such a

method is the most effective means of fabricating the fiction he wants to create; he uses time

travel, in a sense, as a metaphor for the art of fiction. "He is not looking to give his readers the

thrill of the paranormal or to make us shiver at the mysteries of the unknown," Warner writes;

"he rather presents marvels as knowable, introduces us to wonders of nature and the universe as

revealed by reason" (*Time* xvi). Instead, he views novels "as distinguished from those pseudo-scientific stories in which imaginative experience rather than personal conduct was the matter in hand, on the assumption that problems of adjustment were the essential matter for novel writing" (*Experiment* 410). Those "problems of adjustment" are the motivation for and the focus of his particular authorial technique.

The Time Traveller's careful and logical explanation of his invention at the beginning of Wells's novella effectively "domesticates" the Time Machine, but not without opposition founded in the tension between the real and the symbolic that exists within his description. The presentation of "far-fetched material" through objective, scientific reasoning and "seemingly 'near-fetched' observation" is what captures the attention of the Time Traveller's audience, and what makes them skeptical from the onset of his story.

The gentlemen represent various aspects of contemporary Victorian society: the anonymous narrator is joined by a Doctor, a Psychologist, the Editor of a well-known daily paper, a Journalist, a Provincial Mayor, individuals referred to as "the quiet man," "the very young man," and "Filby, an argumentative person with red hair" (*Time* 3). They are an assortment of educated, upper-middle class men, and upon being confronted with the inventor's radical new ideas, express just as wide a variety of arguments against them. As the Time Traveller explicitly states at the beginning of the first chapter, "I shall have to controvert one or two ideas that are almost universally accepted…[but] I do not mean to ask you to accept anything without reasonable ground for it" (*Time* 3). His "reasonable grounds" are disputed just as quickly as they are introduced, in part because of their relative newness and in part because of the ignorance of his audience to the concepts he presents.

As the Time Traveller explains:

Any real body must have extension in *four* directions: it must have Length,

Breadth, Thickness and – Duration. But through a natural infirmity of the

flesh…we incline to overlook this fact. There are really four dimensions, three

which we call the three planes of Space, and a fourth, Time. There is, however, a

tendency to draw an unreal distinction between the former three dimensions and

the latter, because it happens that our consciousness moves intermittently in one

direction along the latter from the beginning to the end of our lives (*Time* 4).

Time, as his audience understands it, cannot be manipulated. Human experience of Time

suggests that it is finite and contained within our lifespan; however, what the Time Traveller

means to say is that the reverse is actually true. Human experience is, in actuality, contained

within the infinite scope of Time. It can be changed and explored in as many ways as Space; in

fact, as the Time Traveller emphasizes, "*There is no difference between Time and any of the

three dimensions of Space except that our consciousness moves along with it*" (*Time* 4). Once

the mold of experience is broken – the frame is splintered, as Wells might say – individuals are

as free to move about in Time as they are in Space.

The Time Traveller's argument is that every object, individual, concept, and experience

has two aspects – the actual and the idea thereof – and that a reconciliation of these parts is what

creates an impression within a person's mind. To illustrate this concept, he refers to "a portrait

of a man at eight years old, another at fifteen, another at seventeen, another at twenty-three and

so on. All these are evidently sections, as it were, Three-Dimensional representations of his

Four-Dimensioned being, which is a fixed and unalterable thing" (*Time* 5). The Three-

Dimensional representations symbolize a moment in time, and without them, that moment would

no longer exist. Each painting is "a fixed and unalterable thing," just as the Four-Dimensioned

being that it depicts is "a fixed and unalterable thing," but the moment in which it was created is

transient and malleable because it lacks that essential dimension – duration. When the Time

Traveller says that "time is only a kind of space," he reveals the influence of recent scientific and

technological developments on his understanding of the world. From railway travel to

telegraphy, new technology and media suggested that time was negotiable and the experience

thereof controllable. This confirms what Walter Benjamin writes in "The Work of Art in the

Age of Mechanical Reproduction": "that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is

the aura of the work of art" (Benjamin 5). Benjamin explains:

> The concept of aura…with reference to historical objects may usefully be
>
> illustrated with reference to the aura of natural ones. We define the aura of the
>
> latter as the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be. If, while
>
> resting on a summer afternoon, you follow with your eyes a mountain range on
>
> the horizon or a branch which casts its shadow over you, you experience the aura
>
> of those mountains, of that branch. This image makes it easy to comprehend the
>
> social bases of the contemporary decay of the aura. It rests on two circumstances,
>
> both of which are related to the increasing significance of the masses in
>
> contemporary life. Namely, the desire of contemporary masses to bring things
>
> "closer" spatially and humanly, which is just as ardent as their bent toward
>
> overcoming the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction. Every
>
> day the urge grows stronger to get hold of an object at very close range by way of
>
> its likeness, its reproduction (Benjamin 4).

However close one might get to a four-dimensional being through its three-dimensional

representation, he will not – without the aid of time travel – be able to overcome the temporal

space between his moment and the moment in which the impression originated. The Time

Traveller's concept of time as a spatial dimension is rooted in those new technologies that

allowed it to be manipulated, from the railway to the telegraph.

   After showing his friends the paintings, the Time Traveller produces a weather record

and traces the line on the diagram that shows the barometer's movement as he poses the

question: "Surely the mercury did not trace this line in any of the dimensions of Space generally

recognized? But certainly it traced such a line, and that line, therefore, we must conclude was

along the Time-Dimension" (*Time* 5). The various peaks and dips on the barometer reading are

the equivalent of the multiple portraits of a single man at a number of distinct points in his life.

Like the man's Four-Dimensional being, the weather, too, is a fixed and unalterable thing; and

like the artist's Three-Dimensional representations of the man, the line symbolizes instantaneous

impressions of the weather recorded by the mercury in the barometer. Neither the weather nor

the man can be revisited at the precise moments of those impressions along the Space-Time

continuum; at least, not without man-made technology.

   As the Time Traveller points out, humans are just as limited in Space as they are in Time:

"save for spasmodic jumping and the inequalities of the surface, man had no freedom of vertical

movement" before technology was developed to help overcome the force of gravity in the form

of balloons (*Time* 6). Kittler touches on this concept in *Discourse Networks 1800/1900* in his

discussion of the developments in communications technology that caused some of the

"problems of adjustment" that are central to *The Time Machine*. Kittler writes, "the phonograph

and the typewriter exist for the same reason. Edison was nearly deaf, and the blind were

foremost among the builders of typewriters. Media, like psychophysical experiments, begin with

a physiological deficiency" (Kittler 231). In the case of the Time Machine, the "physiological

deficiency" that is being overcome is the way in which "our mental existences, which are

immaterial and have no dimensions, are passing along the Time-Dimension with a uniform

velocity from the cradle to the grave" (*Time* 6).

The Time Traveller suggests to his companions that their physical existences, which are

material and do have dimensions, do not necessarily have to accompany their mental existences

on that linear journey through Space and Time. If man can invent a balloon that allows him to

move vertically through Space, against the force of gravity, "why should he not hope that

ultimately he may be able to stop or accelerate his drift along the Time-Dimension, or even turn

about and travel the other way?" (*Time* 6) In fact, despite the Medical Man's conjecture that

"you cannot get away from the present moment," individuals already engage in a separation of

their mental and physical existences regularly, whether they realize it or not (*Time* 6). As the

Time Traveller replies,

> We are always getting away from the present moment…For instance, if I am
>
> recalling an incident very vividly I go back to the instant of its occurrence: I
>
> become absent-minded, as you say. I jump back for a moment. Of course we
>
> have no means of staying back for any length of time, any more than a savage or
>
> an animal has of staying six feet above the ground (*Time* 6).

By way of an impression that symbolizes a moment in time, a person can return to that moment.

If he can do this symbolically and instantaneously, the Time Traveller argues, he might also be

able to do so physically and with control over the duration of the experience. The only

difference between the Time Traveller's experiment and the invention of the typewriter and the

gramophone is that the fictional Time Machine is intended to move bodies, while the other

machines were created to transmit ideas. Both, however, are driven by what Kittler calls "a physiological deficiency."

The difference (and the source of conflict) between the Time Traveller and his friends is rooted in this concept of physiology. The idea for the invention has been facilitated by the idea of a deficiency – one that has not occurred to the inventor's audience. They begin to entertain it as they come to realize that this is the foundation for the experiment, offering up a number of aspects of contemporary society that might benefit from the ability to travel through time in both directions: as the Psychologist exclaims, "'It would be remarkably convenient for the historian…One might travel back and verify the accepted account of the Battle of Hastings, for instance!'" The Very Young Man answers him with an idea for the future: "'Just think! One might invest all one's money, leave it to accumulate at interest, and hurry on ahead!'" (*Time* 7) Whether they realize it or not, each scenario the gentlemen present illuminates the same deficiency in mankind's traditional experience of time: that uniformly linear movement "from the cradle to the grave" that was challenged with the development of the new sciences and technologies of the Victorian era (*Time* 6).

What H. G. Wells says about *The Time Machine* – that its conception "was never the writer's own peculiar idea. Other people were coming to it" – the inventor might also say about his experiment (*Time* 94). As Wells elaborates, "it is the idea that Time is a fourth dimension and that the normal present is a three-dimensional section of a four-dimensional universe. The only difference between the time dimension and the others…lay in the movement of consciousness along it" (*Time* 94). The application of language typically used to refer to the dimensions of Space to the Time Dimension – specifically, "movement" – reveals the source of the "idea" and those "other people" who were also involved in its development. In particular,

Wells points to "the laboratories and debating society of the Royal College of Science," where he studied biology, geology, and physics under some of the most influential scientists working in England during the nineteenth century. As a student of T. H. Huxley, a biologist known for his advocacy of Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, Wells writes that he experienced "an extraordinary mental enlargement as my mind passed from the printed sciences within book covers to these intimate real things and then radiated outward to a realization that the synthesis of the sciences composed a vital interpretation of the world" (*Experiment* 160). In *The Time Machine*, Wells explores the connection between those 'intimate real things' and the vast world that they inhabit through that term coined by Gomel -- 'heterogenous onotological embedding' – a literary form that reflects "the two poles of the *fin-de-siècle* evolutionary debate" (Gomel 339). The frame narrative's reliance on historical determinism while it embeds the Time Traveller's narrative of historical contingency creates a sense of aporia within the novel, which, Gomel argues, "indicates Wells's own indecision with regard to the true nature of time and history" (Gomel 339). As Wells writes in his autobiography:

> Biological science can still get along because practically all its questions and phenomena lie within the scope of normal experience. Its subject matter is apparently confined to the earth and to a measurable sphere of time. It frames human history and human life and is itself in its turn completely framed. It can work on indefinitely within the common presumptions. It is only when biology comes into contact with physics and the question What is life? Demands an answer in terms of physics, that real mystery is broached. But physical science is far more comprehensive, and in every direction it recedes beyond the scope of

experimental thinking and of language based on common experience (*Experiment*

177).

The two sciences, as Wells asserts, inform one another, despite the very distinct differences

between their subject matter and methodology. As he describes it in this passage, biological time

is essentially finite, while physical time is unlimited. However, it is only through a combination

of the two that life can exist, and that, for Wells, is the "real mystery." *The Time Machine* draws

from both fields of science in its two narratives, and their simultaneous inclusion is the

foundation of Gomel's argument for Wells's indecision.

Wells's thoughts on the complicated nature of the relationship between time and history

would become a source of controversy later in his career with the publication of his two

historical works, *The Outline of History* (1920) and *A Short History of the World* (1922), both of

which "break with historical conventions by looking forward to the next stage in history"

(Parrinder xi). Wells, who saw history as 'a race between education and catastrophe,' could not

think about the past and present without considering their implications for the future. However,

his uncertainty about the source of those implications during the 1890s is made evident in *The*

Time Machine's stance "between the two late-Victorian concepts of evolution-as-design and

evolution-as-contingency," which is represented by the conflicting perspectives of the Time

Traveller and his audience (Gomel 338).

The inventor's argument for the possibility of time travel – and inherently for

physiological deficiency – relies on the concept of historical contingency. The skepticism

exhibited by the framing narrator and the rest of the Time Traveller's companions is born of their

society's preference for historical determinism. In both narratives, the presence of the time

travel chronotope allows time to become, as Bakhtin writes, "palpable and visible…the

chronotope, functioning as the primary means for materializing time and space, emerges as a

center for concretizing representation, as a force giving body to the entire novel" (Bakhtin 22).

The idea that man "may be able to stop or accelerate his drift along the Time-Dimension, or even

to turn about and travel the other way" is not the source of the audience's discomfort, though that

is the focal point of their argument (*Time* 6). Rather, the basis for their disbelief is much more

deeply rooted in their own identities – both individually and as a society. As Sidney Fay writes

in "The Idea of Progress":

> The impressive discoveries of gunpowder, printing, the compass, and new lands
>
> overseas, [Sir Francis Bacon] declared, showed how rapidly knowledge was
>
> already advancing. 'There is therefore much ground for hoping that there are still
>
> laid up in the womb of nature many secrets of excellent use…which have not yet
>
> been found out.' Scientific experimentation was the key for discovering these
>
> secrets which would be of great utility in furthering the happiness of mankind"
>
> (Fay 235).

Bacon's statement is taken from his *Novum Organum*, published in 1620, when exciting new

developments in the field of astronomy were providing new information about the world we live

in – creating, in a sense, a cultural environment similar to that of the nineteenth century in

Europe. As Charles Lyell writes of his work in *Principles of Geology* (1833):

> Never, perhaps, did any science, with the exception of astronomy, unfold, in an
>
> equally brief period, so many novel and unexpected truths, and overturn so many
>
> preconceived opinions…the surface on this planet [was] regarded as having
>
> remained unaltered since its creation, until the geologist proved that it had been

the theatre of reiterated change, and was still the subject of slow but never ending

fluctuations (Lyell 24).

Geology provided the framework for Charles Darwin's research, the conclusions of which were

published in 1859 as *Origin of Species* and, in 1871, *The Descent of Man*. Lyell and Darwin

suggested that the world was not thousands, but billions of years old – and did so with physical,

tangible evidence that was and had long been a part of everyday life, "signs which convey to our

minds more definite ideas than figures can do, of the immensity of time" (Lyell 25). Gomel

writes that "the scandal of Darwinism in Victorian culture was not only due to its incompatibility

with the Biblical chronology but also to its notion of history as non-directional and shaped by

chance. This notion led physicist William Herschel to dub Darwinism 'the law of higgledy-

piggedly'" (Gomel 337). Darwin's idea was that evolution occurred by natural selection and

adaptation, which neglected the linear narrative of history that had always dominated western

thought.

However 'higgedly-piggedly' the ideas that originated with Lyell and Darwin might have

seemed, they were, as Sidney Fay suggests is often the case, "potent factors in social change"

(Fay 231). Darwin's concepts of evolution by adaptation and natural selection "did not

necessarily mean social progress, or, even when applied by analogy to society as an organism,

that the movement of man was toward a desirable goal" (Fay 237). The preference of geologists

and biologists for contingency and timeliness over fate and design was unlike any idea that had

been introduced into society for hundreds of years, and as it spread throughout Victorian culture

over the course of the late nineteenth century, its effect became increasingly apparent – and its

resolution increasingly distant. Despite the fact that more than thirty years had passed since

Origin of Species first captured the attention of western society by the time *The Time Machine*,

was published, the duality of the text's narrative in addition to the apparent skepticism of the

Time Traveller's audience is evidence of how the two perspectives struggled to coexist, within

society and within individuals such as Wells himself.

In addition to the struggle for harmony between contingency and determinism, a conflict

with similar implications for the history of humanity was introduced into Victorian society in the

form of thermodynamics, an area of science developed by Joule, von Mayer, Helmholtz, and

others during the early- to mid-nineteenth century. The first law of thermodynamics, on the

conservation of energy, stated that in a system such as the universe, energy was neither created

nor destroyed but constantly involved in the process of transformation from one state to another.

The key to the first law was containment: the "system" of interest should not lose or gain energy,

but circulate it.

Members of Victorian society took an interest in thermodynamics because it seemed to

confirm what they thought they knew about the world. As Joule pointed out in an 1847 lecture:

"'How comes it to pass that, though in almost all natural phenomena we witness the arrest of

motion and the apparent destruction of living force, we find that no waste or loss of living force

has actually occurred?'" (Choi 3) This question, which supported the first law, characterized

thermodynamics as circulatory and causal:

> With its transcendent qualities, its proofs of resurrection and eternal presence,
>
> [thermodynamics] offered reassurances that seemed almost theological. For
>
> conservation, much like contemporaneous providentialism, alluded to a universe
>
> whose operations, while sometimes invisible, were yet always present and
>
> meaningful (Choi 3).

It implied a harmonious relationship between the known and the unknown, the seen and the unseen – a comforting thought in a time when the most essential aspects of human experience were changing. New technologies such as the telegraph made communication – and the relationships it affected – seem less tangible, but through the guarantee of return in the first law of thermodynamics, that loss was made less severe.

Despite the apparent reconcilability between the law of conservation and the popular ideology of determinism that made the introduction of thermodynamics relatively uncontroversial, the idea of entropy presented in the second law of thermodynamics seemed to challenge that harmony. According to the second law, while the amount of energy in a system stays the same, it constantly changes form – and any time energy changes form, some of it is made inaccessible and can no longer be used for 'work'. In any limited system with both dynamic and potential energy, then, the proportion of inaccessible potential energy is constantly growing while the amount of accessible dynamic energy decreases. The scientific community understood the first and second laws as confirmations of one another, since the transformation of energy from an active to a latent state as predicted by the second law proved the transformability suggested by the first law (Choi). However, the idea was far less popular among the rest of Victorian society, since it inevitably suggests that all "systems" are in a constant state of degeneration. It was a discomforting concept for the same reason that Darwin's publications were so ardently protested. Neither was compatible with the idea of progress: that "civilization has moved, is moving, and will continue to move in a desirable direction" (Fay 231). Darwinism and thermodynamics both agreed that things were moving, but the direction of that movement was called into question.

The complicated nature of the relationship between the two laws of thermodynamics and how that relationship was perceived by society were a source of conflict in Victorian culture as well as in the narratives it produced. As Tina Young Choi argues,

> These two laws invoked and relied upon markedly different narrative structures to describe the same system, thus explaining, perhaps, some of the strong philosophical and moral discontent that entropy inspired. For while the second law conceived of energy's transformations as irrecoverable and irreversible, always inevitably moving towards some final, entropic state, the first allowed one to imagine a world of possible reversals and returns. Entropy demanded a linear narrative, while conservation suggested a closed, circulatory one (Choi 4).

Choi suggests that novels published during the mid-Victorian era – referring specifically to Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations* and George Eliot's *Middlemarch* – were influenced by the conservative form of closure. The closed system of such a novel moves through plot points and conflicts toward a final resolution while at the same time "reassuring readers of its desire for containment and its ability to encompass all of its elements into a single, sweeping plot of transformation and recovery" (Choi 5).

While Choi's readings of *Great Expectations* and *Middlemarch* are optimistic – both novels are rife with examples of irrecoverable loss – they are supported by the way in which both narratives progress linearly towards conflict resolution. Thomas Vargish also refers to Dickens and Eliot (as well as Charlotte Brontë) as examples of the "providential aesthetic" of mid-Victorian fiction, which he describes as "the sense of fatality or destiny, the inconsequent actualization of individual desire, the reading of plan and pattern in individual and social history, and above all the discovery of coincidence" (Vargish 243). Providentialism – the belief that

everything happens according to God's plan – had been the dominant ideology in England for centuries, and it provided comfort to members of society in the way that it explained the unexplainable simply as the will of a higher power. If the Bible were to be believed – if it were true that God is "the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End" – then humanity must be a part of a predetermined, linear narrative (*Holy Bible*, Rev. 22.13).

By the late-Victorian era, however, the applicability of the linear narrative had become less common as the expansion and development of more and more technologies – the railway, the telegraph, and film, for example – made the negotiability of time and space increasingly apparent and available to members of society. Like the existence of thermodynamic energy in two states – dynamic (visible) and potential (invisible), people came to recognize the existence of an infinite amount of potential experience surrounding their own. The concerns that characterized the *fin de siècle* in England were brought about by the way that potential impressions quickly seemed to outnumber actual ones and therefore increase the possibilities available to every individual, reducing the likelihood of mankind's role in a single, linear narrative.

Since "time is the foundation of narrative…Time, rather than space, shapes such salient features of narrative as directionality, causality, and agency," the shift in human perception and experience of time necessarily shifted how impressions of those experiences were conveyed in literature (Gomel 335). Despite the "very fundamental differences" between H. G. Wells and Henry James, works by both authors display evidence of the tension between conservation and entropy. To maintain harmony between order and disorder, both novelists modified the systems in which they operated. In giving the Time Traveller the ability to negotiate time as a fourth dimension of space in *The Time Machine*, Wells brings the whole history of the universe within

his system. James, on the other hand, takes a different approach: he focuses on the human

mind's impressions of that history, suggesting that rather than actual individuals, objects, and

relationships, the impressions thereof are what matter most to an understanding of humanity's

role in the universe. The personality, as James understood it, could be navigated without regards

to time and space; individuals did not need a "Time Machine" to explore the mysteries of the

psyche.

In the first chapter of *The Time Machine*, the Psychologist suggests that "'[y]ou *can*

move about in all directions of Space, but you cannot move about in Time'" (*Time* 6). The Time

Traveller responds that that "is the germ of my great discovery," explaining that while

individuals can move about in time for a moment (becoming "absent-minded"), they cannot stay

there – just as an organism cannot, without the aid of technology, resist the forces of gravity that

limit its experience of space. The Time Traveller is quick to point out, though:

> [A] civilized man is better off than the savage in this respect. He can go up against
>
> gravitation in a balloon, and why should he not hope that ultimately he may be
>
> able to stop or accelerate his drift along the Time-Dimension, or even turn about
>
> and travel the other way? (*Time* 6)

The inventor's inspiration for the Time Machine comes from the ability of the imagination to

manipulate space and time. He creates an object that enables the human body to physically

experience what the mind can already accomplish. Wells, "an exponent of a materialistic kind of

artistry," relies on that tangible element of experience that the imagination lacks (Edel 18). As a

lifelong member of the lower class and a man of science, he understood reality to be, simply,

what he experienced. For him it was not "something to be submitted to the alchemy of the

imagination; it was something to be *manipulated* with all the resources of human intelligence"

(Edel 19). Henry James, however, "could look reality full in the face and unabashedly change its form to suit himself: the world was his to refashion into art" (Edel 18-19). James saw himself as an artist, and as he wrote to Wells in 1915, "It is art that *makes* life, makes interest, makes importance" (James 266). He believed that the novelist should not just represent, but create experience. James published two novellas in 1898 – *In the Cage* and *The Turn of the Screw* – whose protagonists have the ability to do just that. In a time when human experience seemed limitless and its linearity ambiguous, James's protagonists (ordinary people: a telegraphist and a governess) heroically negotiate the disorderly ambiguity of the 'systems' in which they operate to create meaning out of that disorder. Unlike the Time Traveller, who requires a Time Machine to physically travel into the future in order to obtain 'real', tangible impressions that enhance his knowledge of his own society, the heroines of *In the Cage* and *The Turn of the Screw* use their imaginations to acquire the impressions that inform their experiences. While Wells regards the novel as being akin to "a market place or a boulevard", James thinks of it as an "extension of life" – and as Wells says, "I had a queer feeling that we were both incompatibly right" (*Experiment* 411, James 266, *Experiment* 414).

3. The Ambiguity of Truth in *The Turn of the Screw*

While H. G. Wells's initial involvement in literature was based on the assumption that, as

he writes, "problems of adjustment were the essential matter for novel writing" with a full

awareness of "the possible use of the novel as a help to conduct" both socially and politically,

Henry James was much more interested in using the form to explore the depths of human

consciousness (*Experiment* 410). Wells believed that novels had tremendous potential to be used

as social tools, but from James's point of view "there were not so much 'novels' as The Novel,

and it was a very high and important achievement. He thought of it as an Art Form and of

novelists as artists of a very special and exalted type. He was concerned about their greatness

and repute" (*Experiment* 411). Wells, meanwhile, was more concerned about the survival of the

human race.

The irreconcilability of their differences is apparent in the correspondence between the

two novelists in July 1915; Wells writes to James: "There is of course a real and very

fundamental difference in our innate and developed attitudes toward life and literature. To you

literature like painting is an end, to me literature like architecture is a means, it has a use" (*Henry*

264). To which James responds:

> "I *have* no view of life and literature, I maintain, other than that our form of the
>
> latter in especial is admirable exactly by its range and variety, its plasticity and
>
> liberality, its fairly living on the sincere and sifting experience of the individual
>
> practitioner…it is art that *makes* life, makes interest, makes importance, for our
>
> consideration and application of these things, and I know of no substitute
>
> whatever for the force and beauty of its process" (*Henry* 265-267).

James perceives himself first and foremost as an artist whose job is to create life; Wells instead believes that the role of the novelist is to convey life and already existing ideas about life. It is a complicated debate with two strong arguments, and as Wells confesses: "I had a queer feeling that we were both incompatibly right" (*Experiment* 414).

Henry James was born in 1843 in New York City into a wealthy family of intellectuals. He had a privileged youth, traveling to Europe multiple times during his adolescence and studying under English, German, and French tutors and governesses while abroad. Because of his father's inclination for travel, James's education was erratic: much of it occurred in European theaters, museums, and galleries (*American Writers* 9). When he was nineteen he briefly enrolled in Harvard Law School, but withdrew to pursue his love of literature. His biographer, Leon Edel writes:

> From his early twenties he began to earn his own way and wholly by literary work. He was alone among major American writers in never seeking any other employment. He was devoted to his art; and his productivity did not influence his meticulous style – that style by which he believed a writer gains his passport to posterity (*American Writers* 5-6).

As James writes in "The Art of Fiction," an 1884 essay encouraging novelists to exercise creative freedom rather than adhere to any 'rules' about the content or technique of their specific narrative form, fiction "must take itself seriously for the public to take it so" ("Art" 1). James's dedication to his craft is proof of the amount of truth he found in that statement: he took his role as a novelist so seriously as to state in the same essay that "the novel is history" ("Art" 2). Edel explains that James

believed that the artist in fiction is a historian of that part of life never found in

history books: the private life that goes on behind the walls of dwellings, but

which is also part of the society in which it is lived. Literature for him was the

great repository of life; and he believed that if the novel is a mirror in a roadway,

it reflects not only the panorama of existence, but the countenance of the artist in

the very act of experiencing the world around him (*American Writers* 6).

James's fascination with "the whole deep mystery of a man's soul and conscience," as he put it,

is apparent in all of his works, and as an artist living and working in London for most of his

literary career, he certainly does capture his "countenance…in the very act of experiencing the

world around him" (Tuveson 786, *American Writers* 6). For James, that world had always been

one of wealth, privilege, and intellectual thought; his home was in the uppermost tier of society

among the members of the aristocracy who benefitted from the working masses. He had the

resources to use new technologies like the railway and the telegraph that the middle- and lower-

classes only had limited access to. James's experience of these transportation and

communications media would have been much more extensive than Wells's. As a 'have', he

was able to immerse himself in the concepts and objects that were changing Victorian culture

while paying close attention to his own individual experience with them. Wells, on the other

hand, was a 'have-not' who never had this luxury; as a result, he focused more on what these

changes meant for society than what they meant on a personal level.

Wells's generic and unnamed 'types' are contrasted by the incredibly detailed portraits

James paints of his characters. As Edel writes, their debate is of "the distinction to be drawn

between literature as the voice of the individual and literature engaged in the furtherance of

social welfare" (*Henry* 12). James's ability to maintain the "voice of the individual" in a time

when science and technology so forcefully imposed upon society the infinite, the instantaneous,

and the unfamiliar explains why "even during his lifetime certain of his fellow-novelists abroad

addressed this American in their midst as 'Master'" (*American Writers* 8). That is not to say that

James was not influenced by the same dramatic social and cultural changes that are at the heart

of *The Time Machine*, but "where H. G. Wells was the explorer of outer worlds, Henry James

mapped the interior of the personality" (McMillan 3). In his two 1898 novellas, *In the Cage* and

The Turn of the Screw, James does not send his characters into unknown worlds, but rather

brings out the uncanny that exists within the individual to convey his idea that the "whole deep

mystery of a man's soul and conscience" needs exploring. As Sidney Fay points out, "[s]team

and the railway age abridged space, economized time, and added in many ways to the material

comforts of life," while "electricity opened new vistas" (Fay 237). Wells and James both

recognized these "new vistas" but approached them in very different ways: Marina Warner

explains that "when H. G. Wells throws open vistas (a word he likes), he wants to persuade that

the world on the other side of the door that he opens is not a personal delusion but a scientific

truth that can be explained" (Warner xvi). Henry James, on the other hand, "most effectively

conjures the shivers and the pleasures of unexplained phenomena and irrational malignancy in

The Turn of the Screw" (Warner xvi). Wells sought to expose the implications of changing

social concepts of time and space, while James's goal was to provide readers with an "extension

of life" that might enable them to determine those implications on their own in a much more

personal way.

Critic Ernest Tuveson writes that *The Turn of the Screw* is "a movement for investigation

of human psychology which interested many important thinkers towards the end of the century"

(Tuveson 783). Tuveson credits James's close ties to the Society for Psychical Research – his

brother was one of its presidents and a number of his friends and correspondents were active

members – for the way in which the author became "involved in this story in a way that his

imagination required, and to that fact, perhaps, may be ascribed the fact that he created a

masterpiece" (Tuveson 783). James's "movement" is not simply a fictional analysis of the

goings-on at Bly as they are related through the lens of the governess's imagination. It is a

reflection of James's own "countenance" as he experiences the world around him and a

statement against the idea of "mechanical rationalism" that had become popular during the

second half of the nineteenth century and that his brother and the rest of the Society for Psychical

Research had openly opposed.

     In an 1895 presidential address before the Society, William James argued that science

should be regarded only as a method and not as the body of belief that it was evolving into by the

mid-1890s. He says that the scientific perspective had, by that point, "come to be identified with

a certain fixed general belief, the belief that the deeper order of Nature is mechanical

exclusively, and that non-mechanical categories are irrational ways of conceiving and explaining

even such a thing as human life" ("Address" 886). The idea that everything might be explained

mechanically -- "mechanical rationalism," James calls it – is a complete misapprehension that

makes,

> if it becomes one's only way of thinking, a violent breach with the ways of
>
> thinking that have, until our own time, played the greatest part in human history.
>
> Religious thinking, ethical thinking, poetical thinking, teleological, emotional,
>
> sentimental thinking, what one might call the personal view of life to distinguish
>
> it from the rationalistic view, have been and even still are, outside of well-drilled
>
> scientific circles, the dominant forms of thought. But for mechanical rationalism,

personality is an insubstantial illusion; the chronic belief of mankind, that events

may happen for the sake of their personal significance, is an abomination; and the

notions of our grandfathers about oracles and omens, divinations and apparitions,

miraculous changes of heart and wonders worked by inspired persons, answers to

prayer and providential leadings, are a fabric absolutely baseless, a mass of sheer

*un*truth ("Address" 886).

The adoption of mechanical rationalism would drastically change the whole history of mankind's

shared experience. It would refute culture and identity, would void all of the meaning that

people had come to attribute to their lives as individuals and as a species; such an attitude

exchanged that "whole deep mystery of man's soul and conscience" for "a most shallow belief"

(Tuveson, 786, "Address" 887). Where William was interested in gaining knowledge of the

mental processes that made up the intangible and ambiguous phenomena of human experience,

though, Henry James was interested in "the history of consciousness rather than of the mentality"

(Tuveson 789). The novelist was not looking to explain, but to explore, a task he accomplishes

to an admirable degree in *The Turn of the Screw.*

James's story, like *The Time Machine,* is presented through two narratives, with an

anonymous embedding narrator who introduces the governess's manuscript that is the lens

through which the reader experiences the mysterious events that occur at Bly. The narrator

explains that the tale he has transcribed "really required for a proper intelligence a few words of

prologue," thus necessitating his role in establishing the text as "a fairy tale pure and simple --

save indeed as to its springing not from an artless and measureless, but from a conscious and

cultivated credulity" (Preface 8).

As Warner explains, "*The Time Machine* in some deep sense does perform as Wells's own imagination, vaulting into aeons of futurity. It translates a faculty of mind – projective imagination – into an actual piece of technology, and embodies it physically in time and space" (*Time* xiv). Wells transformed speculations about the mysterious inner workings of the human mind when he "transposed mere mental voyaging into an actual vehicle; he gave an altogether new, exciting and persuasive meaning to the term 'out of body experience'" (*Time* xiv). James, however, preferred to stay within the mind, which he believed was a frontier as infinite as the Time Dimension that Wells sends his Time Traveller out to explore. James writes:

> Experience is never limited and it is never complete; it is an immense sensibility, a kind of huge spider-web, of the finest silken threads, suspended in the chamber of consciousness and catching every airborne particle in its tissue. It is the very atmosphere of the mind; and when the mind is imaginative much more when it happens to be that of a man of genius – it takes to itself the faintest hints of life, it converts the very pulses of the air into revelations ("Art" 5).

The Turn of the Screw is James's proof of the ability of the mind to create experience from the most miniscule and indeterminate particles of life of which it might capture an impression; the story is born of what James calls "the vividest little note for sinister romance that I had ever jotted down" (Preface 7). He, like the narrator who frames the governess's tale, was assembled with friends around a fire one evening when the subject of conversation turns "to apparitions and night-fears, to the marked and sad drop in the general supply, and still more in the general quality, of such commodities" (Preface 7).

James laments the replacement of stories that could "rouse the dear old secret terror" with a new type of tale, "the mere modern 'psychical' case, washed clean of all queerness as by

exposure to a flowing laboratory tap" (Preface 7). H. G. Wells wanted to eliminate such

'queerness' – to lend familiarity to the unfamiliar – but for James, the loss of their queerness

made these stories mere skeletons of experience. It meant a loss of "that part of life never found

in history books: the private life that goes on behind the walls of dwellings, but which is also part

of the society in which it is lived" that Leon Edel writes is at the heart of all of James's fiction.

The idea for *The Turn of the Screw*, James claims, came from this evening, when one of his

companions attempted to

> recover for us one of the scantest of fragments of this form at its best…[but] he
>
> himself could give us but a shadow of a shadow – my own appreciation of which,
>
> I need scarcely say, was exactly wrapped up in that thinness. On the surface there
>
> wasn't much, but another grain, none the less, would have spoiled the precious
>
> pinch addressed to its end (Preface 7).

As he says in "The Art of Fiction," the role of the novelist is to convert "the very pulses of the air

into revelations" – to show the extent to which the unnoticed and the ambiguous parts of life can

and should be explored. Like the members of the Society for Psychical Research, James

believed that all of those cultural components which were challenged by the rise of mechanical

rationalism were essential to the "personal view of life," and that "in the vast literature of man's

supernatural experiences there is a real truth, even if it has not as yet been analyzed in scientific

terms; to discover that truth, moreover, would be of inestimable value to humanity" (Tuveson

787). James held his art in so high a regard because he believed that, by simply "seeing, feeling,

arriving at awareness – and creating from this awareness" – the novelist might help individuals

(or even society as a whole) move toward the recognition of this truth. While Wells's truth was

universal, James's was deeply personal: Wells wanted his work to affect society, while James

aimed to create novels that would reveal something about the individual in a way that only the

highest form of art could.

The source of conflict at the heart of *The Turn of the Screw* is this ambiguity of truth,

which appears in a variety of forms within the text. The relationship between the living and the

dead; whether or not this relationship exists; and the reliability of the narrative that argues for its

existence are all questionable. Interpretations of the novel have been divided into

"apparitionist/non-apparitionist" and "Freudian/non-Freudian," but no matter what the critic's

stance, the issue of indeterminacy is central to every reading (Parkinson, Chase). Dennis Chase

writes,

> To distance the story, James employed the time-worn device of the old
>
> manuscript to authenticate the events at Bly. But the mind of the governess is the
>
> filter through which those events must come. The memories are hers, but does
>
> she record what actually happened at Bly or what she imagined, what she
>
> unconsciously wished for? (Chase 199)

The question of the governess's reliability is certainly well-founded; but, like the Time

Traveller's anecdote, it is unimportant. What really matters to the story is the fact that it is, quite

simply, being told. Before the Time Traveller begins to recount his tale, he warns his

companions that "'Most of it will sound like lying. So be it! It's true – every word of it, all the

same'" (*Time* 16). Afterwards, then, he asks them to "'[c]onsider I have been speculating upon

the destinies of our race until I have hatched this fiction. Treat my assertion of its truth as a mere

stroke of art to enhance its interest. And, taking it as a story, what do you think of it?'" (*Time*

87). What really matters to the Time Traveller is the impression that the adventure leaves; this,

too, is the reason given by the narrator of *The Turn of the Screw* for his transcription of the

governess's story. His companion, Douglas, who introduces the tale by saying that "'Nobody

but me, till now, has ever heard. It's quite too horrible…for general uncanny ugliness and horror

and pain'" (*The Turn of the Screw* 1-2). Douglas explains that his understanding of the story

comes from a locked-away manuscript:

> "'And is the record yours? You took the thing down?'
>
> 'Nothing but the impression. I took that *here*' – he tapped his heart. 'I've never
>
> lost it.'" (*Turn* 2).

His desire – and, in turn, the narrator's desire – to pass along the story comes from an

impression, and in James's opinion, "If experience consists of impressions, it may be said that

impressions are experience, just as (have we not seen it?) they are the very air we breathe" ("Art"

5). The governess's impressions of the ghosts of Peter Quint and Miss Jessel, and of their

relationship to her young charges, Miles and Flora, are what define her experience at Bly and the

whole narrative of *The Turn of the Screw*. Whether they are real or fictional does not matter; as

she herself states of Miles near the end of the novel, "his lies made up my truth" (*Turn* 82). Her

ability to create an actual experience out of the plethora of potential ones that have presented

themselves to her makes her the 'heroine' of the story – she accomplishes what James believes

should be the goal of every novelist writing at the end of the Victorian era, when the vistas

opened by new cultural perceptions of time and space seemed incredibly overwhelming and

chaotic.

Miles's lies constitute much more than the governess's experience at Bly – they make up

the very novel that contains them. When the governess first sights Peter Quint at a distance atop

a tower of the house, she thinks "with extraordinary quickness, of each person that he might have

been and that he was not" (*Turn* 16). In her mind, she goes through all the possible "truths" she

can fathom to come to the conclusion that the truthful existence of the man on the tower – for he

is certainly real, she writes, since "I saw him as I see the letters form on this page" (*Turn* 17) –

cannot be true at all. As she explains the paradox, "the truth I had now to turn over was, simply

and clearly, the truth that I could arrive at no account whatever of the visitor with whom I had

been so inexplicably and yet, as it seemed to me, so intimately concerned" (*Turn* 18). The

apparition makes an impression, and that impression comes to control her experience at Bly as

she tries to determine its role in the children's lives. Its lack of tangibility and mechanical

rationalism lend it, as Douglas says in the introduction, a sort of "general uncanny ugliness and

horror and pain" that prevents her from bringing her impression up with Miles and Flora. She

knows that the ghosts are there and acts under the impression that the children also know that the

ghosts are there, but when she proves it in her confrontation with Miles at the end of the novella,

the story and the boy's life both come to an abrupt stop. The ambiguity of the tale lends the

governess the "power to guess the unseen from the seem, to trace the implication of things, to

judge the whole piece by the pattern, the condition of feeling life, in general, so completely that

you are well on our way to knowing any particular corner of it;" and when, finally, she acts on

her impressions and convinces Miles to confess the presence of Peter Quint, she resolves the

ambiguity and thus brings the story to a close ("Art" 5). As James writes in "The Art of

Fiction," "[a]rt lives upon discussion, upon experiment, upon curiosity, upon variety of attempt,

upon the exchange of views and the comparison of standpoints"; and, in the previously cited

letter to Wells, literature "is admirable exactly by its range and variety, its plasticity and

liberality, its fairly living on the sincere and shifting experience of the individual practitioner"

("Art" 1, *Henry* 265). The ending of *The Turn of the Screw* is James's warning against

mechanical rationalism's rejection of the variety and freedom inherent in those ways of thinking

that make up the "personal view of life." If the "whole deep mystery of a man's soul and

conscience" is reduced to "a most shallow belief," as William James suggests, then the novelist

will be deprived of the immensity of humanity and the myriad forms of reality from which he

draws his inspiration for narrative.

Henry James, then, was more aware of the instructive potential of literature than H. G.

Wells gave him credit for. The very existence of *The Turn of the Screw* as a novella is, in a

sense, a plea for the translation of the potential into the actual – of changing "the pulses of the air

into revelations," in the author's own words. James, like Wells, was apparently affected by the

complicated relationship between conservation and entropy; *The Turn of the Screw* shows

evidence of this in its argument for the necessity of potential "energy" that is key to the latter.

Just as the first two laws of thermodynamics are reconcilable in terms of science, James explains

that his goal in writing *The Turn of the Screw* was to illustrate the compatibility of the potential

and the actual, the fictional and the real, and to prove that both exist within one another:

> The thing was to aim at absolute singleness, clearness and roundness, and yet to
>
> depend on an imagination working freely, working (call it) with extravagance; by
>
> which law it wouldn't be thinkable except as free and wouldn't be amusing except
>
> as controlled. The merit of the tale, as it stands, is accordingly, I judge, that it has
>
> struggled successfully with its dangers. It is an excursion into chaos while
>
> remaining…but an anecdote – though an anecdote amplified and highly
>
> emphasized and returning upon itself…I need scarcely add after this that it is a
>
> piece of ingenuity pure and simple, of cold artistic calculation, an *amusette* to
>
> catch those not easily caught (the 'fun' of the capture of the merely witless being
>
> ever but small), the jaded, the disillusioned, the fastidious (Preface 8-9).

The novel ventures into chaos while remaining contained within its covers; it manages to be both the impression of an experience and an experience in and of itself. It proves nothing about the existence of ghosts or of the relationship between the living and the dead, but by allowing the mere ideas of these things to exist within its pages, it makes room for them, too, outside of the text. The reconciliation between the real and the unreal that James creates in *The Turn of the Screw* suggests that they might easily coexist: an argument against mechanical rationalism and for the sharing of ideas about "a subliminal world that centuries of psychical research can only supplement" in hopes that such communication might lead to a realization of that "real truth" found in the ambiguity of the intangible and the supernatural (Kimbrough 177).

4. The Telegraphist and the Novelist: Making Knowledge of Impressions

In 1844, more than half a century before the publication of *The Turn of the Screw*, Edgar

Allan Poe wrote in "The Premature Burial" that "the boundaries which divide Life from Death

are at best shadowy and vague" (Poe 217). Poe lived and worked in the United States at a time

when technological and scientific developments were just beginning to capture the world's

attention, when their meanings and uses were opaque and their implications still unclear. Poe's

suggestion that there is no clear boundary between life and death, however, reveals that even in

their most limited forms, the new ideas that came to characterize the second half of the

nineteenth century had an extraordinary effect on western society. By the 1890s, the

"boundaries" that perplex Poe are still just as "shadowy and vague" – perhaps even more so, as

we see in the events of *The Turn of the Screw*. The continuation of this theme over time

connects the two stories through H. Porter Abbott's idea:

> [T]he representation of conflict in narrative provides a way for a culture to talk to
>
> itself about, and possibly resolve, conflicts that threaten to fracture it (or at least
>
> make living difficult). In this view of narrative, its conflicts are not solely about
>
> particular characters (or entities). Also in conflict, and riding on top of the
>
> conflict of narrative entities, are conflicts regarding values, ideas, feelings, and
>
> ways of seeing the world (Abbott 55).

In both "The Premature Burial" and *The Turn of the Screw*, the ambiguous boundary between

life and death is the source of narrative conflict between and within characters. Literary critic

Caleb Smith attributes the ambiguity and the source of conflict to what he calls "the imagination

of technology," which has long been "an alternating current" (Smith 2). Smith uses electric

imagery to illustrate his argument that an inherent tension has always existed within that

"imagination," since "electricity may promise to raise the dead, but since its discovery it has also

menaced the living" (Smith 2). While the ambiguity of life and death is central to *The Turn of*

the Screw and might be likened to the opacity of the relationship between electricity and

humanity, technology plays no central role in James's novella. It is, however, an essential

component of *In the Cage*, also published in 1898, placing James right in the middle of that

"alternating current" of the "imagination of technology."

James's "power to guess the unseen from the seen" is again at work in *In the Cage*, the

story of a young telegraphist who is, like the governess in *The Turn of the Screw*, a woman with

an active imagination that creates the driving force of the narrative ("Art" 5). While James's

inspiration for *The Turn of the Screw* came from reports of the Society for Psychical Research

that were "succinct and almost colorless…no more than skeletons of full experience," the idea

for *In the Cage* came from another type of narrative "skeleton": the telegram (Tuveson 789).

Telegrams are, as Walter F. Wright writes, "abridged and cryptic"; they are "fragments which

can be arranged in patterns only by an effort of the imagination" (Wright 175). Both James and

his protagonist make that "effort" to arrange a series of telegrams into a pattern that forms a

coherent, yet unreliable, narrative. The telegraphist deduces meaning that is in part true and in

part imagined from a series of telegrams exchanged between two clients, Captain Everard and

Lady Bradeen. In doing so, she "interposes a level of mediation, a layer that intermingles the

materiality of communication, the content of her subjectivity, and the social structures of

bureaucracy, class, and gender" (Menke 975). She exemplifies the various ways in which human

experience is affected by – even, perhaps, defined by – technology at the end of the century in

London. The complexity of the "alternating current" of the "imagination of technology"

manifests itself in the tension between the present and the absent, the medium and the message,

life "in the cage" and life outside of it. Throughout the text, all of these are conflicts "riding on

top of the conflict of narrative entities" that both define relationships and fail to define them,

simultaneously creating meaning and ambiguity. Like *The Turn of the Screw*, *In the Cage* favors

the "personal view of life" over the "rationalistic view," relying on the "poetical", "emotional"

and "sentimental" ways of thinking to represent one of James's "small exhibited lives" that "are

actively, are luxuriously lived" ("Address" 886, Preface [2] 10).

In "The Art of Fiction," James emphasizes how few limitations are placed upon the

novelist. "The only obligation to which in advance we may hold a novel without incurring the

accusation of being arbitrary, is that it be interesting," he writes;

> That general responsibility rests upon it, but it is the only one I can think of. The
>
> ways in which it is at liberty to accomplish this result (of interesting us) strike me
>
> as innumerable and such as can only suffer from being marked out, or fenced in,
>
> by prescription. They are as various as the temperament of man, and they are
>
> successful in proportion as they reveal a particular mind, different from others
>
> ("Art" 4).

According to James, "humanity is immense and reality has a myriad [of] forms," and all of these

are available to the artist in fiction as he creates his work ("Art" 5). As long as the novelist

maintains the "personal" view that experience "is an immense sensibility…the very atmosphere

of the mind," his art will thrive, since it "lives upon discussion, upon experiment, upon curiosity,

upon variety of attempt, upon the exchange of views and the comparison of standpoints" ("Art"

5, 1). As if to prove how small a "grain of observation" is necessary to form a narrative, the

majority of the action of *In the Cage* occurs within the postal-telegraph office where the young

telegraphist works. As James explains in his preface to the novella, "the postal-telegraph office

in general, and above all the small local office of one's daily business, scene of the transaction of

so much of one's daily business…had ever had, to my sense, so much of London to give out, so

much of its huge perpetual story to tell" (Preface [2] 9). The capacity of the office was, for

James, far greater than its spatial dimensions; as a center for communication and a point of

connection that made relations outside of the office possible, it had the potential to be as much a

source of knowledge as it was a source of messages. Despite the "confined and cramped"

quarters where telegraphists worked, James points out that they were made "free, intellectually,

of a range of experience otherwise quite closed to them" (Preface [2] 9). Like the Time

Traveller's laboratory, the postal-telegraph office is, for the young woman whose experience is

the focus of *In the Cage*, hardly the enclosure that it appears to be. Her job brings her into

contact with individuals and situations she would not, as a public servant, otherwise experience.

As a telegraphist, she is in a unique position: she is both human and, while she is "in the cage",

part of a machine.

      Her "position" is how she is introduced in the opening chapter of the novella, when we

are told:

> It had occurred to her early that in her position – that of a young person spending,
>
> in framed and wired confinement, the life of a guinea-pig or a magpie – she
>
> should know a great many persons without their recognizing the acquaintance.
>
> That made it an emotion the more lively – though singularly rare and always,
>
> even then, with opportunity still very much smothered – to see any one come in
>
> whom she knew outside, as she called it, any one who could add anything to the
>
> meanness of her function. Her function was to sit there with two young men – the

other telegraphist and the counter-clerk; to mind the 'sounder,' which was always

going, to dole out stamps and postal-orders, weigh letters, answer stupid

questions, give difficult change and, more than anything else, count words as

numberless as the sands of the sea, the words of telegrams thrust, from morning to

night, through the gap left in the high lattice, across the encumbered shelf that her

forearm ached with rubbing (*In the Cage* 367).

The limitations of her "position" are, as she understands them, strictly physical. She is confined

to her "framed and wired" space, but the amount of information that is available to her within

that space is as vast "as the sands of the sea." As Richard Menke writes, "the telegraphist is

enclosed by a wood and wire 'lattice' reminiscent of the telegraphic network, of which her post

forms the most prosaic node, as if – through a spectacular metonymic logic – the miles of cable

spanning the globe were her 'cage'" (Menke 980). Her "position" is, in that sense, akin to that of

James's novelist, who faces no obligations in his work other than "that it be interesting." Menke

points out that "since telegraphs both send and receive messages, they offer an apposite figure

for the claims of realism and imagination in Victorian fiction; the electric telegraph is the passive

transmission of the message and its active production – simultaneously the mirror and the lamp"

(Menke 976). Similarly, Edel writes, James "believed that if the novel is a mirror in a roadway,

it reflects not only the panorama of existence, but the countenance of the artist in the very act of

experiencing the world around him" (*American Writers* 6). The telegraphist's role provides her

with access to a wealth of experience, and with a strong interest in upper-class life, she is "one of

the people on whom nothing is lost" who James encourages every novelist to be in "The Art of

Fiction" ("Art" 5). The amount of information that is exchanged at her fingertips every day is

incredibly extensive, and when she possesses the essential "cluster of gifts" – "the power to

guess the unseen from the seen, to trace the implication of things, to judge the whole piece by the pattern, the condition of feeling life, in general, so completely that you are well on your way to knowing any particular corner of it" – she can become, in a sense, the sort of artist that James believes is essential to the existence of culture ("Art" 5). Like the governess in *The Turn of the Screw*, she draws from the potential experiences made available to her through the telegrams she exchanges and the customers she serves to create her own authentic experience. She must fill in a number of gaps in information, building connections between messages, to develop her narrative.

As Laura Otis writes, "for the telegrapher, knowledge is something that one *makes*, although she never perceives it this way" (Otis 172). Telegrams offered the same skeletons of experience that, in anyone who possesses the "grain of observation," as James calls it, might inspire the creation of knowledge. When James says that "it is art that *makes* life, makes interest, makes importance" in his letter to H. G. Wells, this is exactly what the telegrapher's role in the story proves (*Henry* 267). As she bridges the gaps in information offered by the telegrams sent by Captain Everard and Lady Bradeen, the fragmentary messages come to offer much more than what they are: "statements out of context that never revealed the true essence of a person or situation" (Otis 164). Their telegrams begin to inform her life outside of the "cage" as she becomes immersed in their affair, and she becomes – at least according to her created "knowledge" of the situation – a person of "interest" and "importance" within their story. Like the Time Traveller in Wells's novella, she invites herself into another world; but unlike the Time Traveller, she does not need to leave the 'cage' in order to do so. As James writes in the preface to *In the Cage*, "to criticize is to appreciate, to appropriate, to take intellectual possession, to establish in fine a relation with the criticized things and make it one's own," and as the

telegraphist criticizes the telegrams in an attempt to learn more about the lives they are a part of,

she takes possession of those lives and makes them a part of her own without ever leaving her

post (Preface [2] 9).

        The third-person omniscient narrator, who provides ironic distance from the confined

setting of the telegraph office and the girl's mind where most of the story's events occur, reveals

the telegraphist's fascination with the upper class early in the story. When, in the opening

paragraph, the idea that "she should know a great many persons without their recognizing the

acquaintance" is suggested, the "great many persons" referred to are the customers whose

correspondence she facilitates – almost exclusively members of the upper class. In the second

chapter, we learn that she had recently "surrendered herself" to

> a certain expansion of her consciousness; something that seemed perhaps vulgarly
>
> accounted for by the fact that, as the blast of the season roared louder and the
>
> waves of fashion tossed their spray further over the counter, there were more
>
> impressions to be gathered and really – for it came to that – more life to be led
>
> (*Cage* 373).

Through her daily interaction with "words as numberless as the sands of the sea," the telegraphist

becomes more and more aware of the disparity between her life in the post office and the lives

she can see, but cannot touch, from within her "cage" (*Cage* 367).

        As three telegraphs are pushed across the counter by Lady Bradeen at the beginning of

the third chapter, the narrator notes that the telegraphist grabs them before her coworker can,

> Mr. Buckton having so frequent a perverse instinct for catching first any eye that
>
> promised the sort of entertainment with which she had her particular affinity. The

amusements of captives are full of a desperate contrivance, and one of our young

friend's ha'pennyworths had become the charming tale of 'Picciola' (*Cage* 375).

The telegraphist, an avid reader who "borrowed novels, very greasy, in fine print and all about

fine folks, at a ha'penny a day," likens her "framed and wired" confinement to the French novel

published in 1836 about a political prisoner saved from his plight for taking care of a flower

from a seed that falls through the walls of the prison where he is housed (*Cage* 371). Lady

Bradeen's first telegram is, in a sense, the "seed" from which the telegraphist's story flowers.

Indeed, after she sends them, she fantasizes about their sender, who signs her telegrams with two

different names: "Cissy" and "Mary". The narrator describes the telegraphist's interest in her

customer:

> To Cissy, to Mary, whichever it was, she found her curiosity going out with a
>
> rush, a mute effusion that floated back to her like a returning tide, the living
>
> colour and splendor of the beautiful head, the light of eyes that seemed to reflect
>
> such utterly other things than the mean things actually before them; and, above
>
> all, the high curt consideration of a manner that even at bad moments was a
>
> magnificent habit and of the very essence of the innumerable things – her beauty,
>
> her birth, her father and mother, her cousins and all her ancestors – that its
>
> possessor couldn't have got rid of even had she wished (*Cage* 377).

Lady Bradeen is the "tide" that finally brings the "blast of the season" and the "waves of

fashion" within the telegraphist's reach, and she is quick "to appreciate, to appropriate, to take

intellectual possession of them," as the sentences that follow reveal:

> How did our obscure little public servant know that for the lady of telegrams this
>
> was a bad moment? How did she guess all sorts of impossible things, such as,

almost on the very spot, the presence of drama at a critical stage and the nature of

the tie with the gentleman at the Hotel Brighton? More than ever before it floated

to her through the bars of the cage that this at last was the high reality, the

bristling truth that she had hitherto only patched up and eked out – one of the

creatures, in fine, in whom all the conditions for happiness actually met, and who,

in the air they made, bloomed with an unwitting insolence (*Cage* 377-78).

The difference between Lady Bradeen and the countless wealthy women who had populated the

post office before her lies in "the way the insolence was tempered by something that was

equally a part of the distinguished life, the custom of a flowerlike bend to the less fortunate – a

dropped fragrance, a mere quick breath, but which in fact pervaded and lingered" (*Cage* 378).

As the narrator explains, "[i]f our young lady had never taken such jumps before it was simply

that she had never before been so affected" (*Cage* 378). The "high reality", the "bristling truth"

that "floats" to her through the wood and wire frame is the very impression that her newly-

expanded consciousness seeks to gather, and, therefore, the opportunity to experience "more

life" that had until this point existed only outside of the cage.

As James writes in "The Art of Fiction," "if experience consists of impressions, it may be

said that impressions are experience" ("Art" 5). The telegraphist's impressions certainly do

become her experience soon after Lady Bradeen's second visit, when she is accompanied by

Captain Everard. In his presence, it occurs to her,

oddly enough, that if, shortly before, the girl's interest in his companion had

sharpened her sense for the messages then transmitted, her immediate vision of

himself had the effect, while she counted his seventy words, of preventing

intelligibility. *His* words were mere numbers, they told nothing whatever; and

after he had gone she was in possession of no name, of no address, of no meaning,

of nothing but a vague sweet sound and an immense impression (*Cage* 380).

Despite her failure to acquire a name, an address, or even a sense of the purpose behind his visit,

"she had taken him in; she knew everything; she had made up her mind" as to his role in the

drama that bloomed in her mind (*Cage* 381). His presence in the shop indicates that he has

returned from Paris, whence Lady Bradeen sent her last message to him, and that "the pair were

again shoulder to shoulder in their high encounter with life, their large and complicated game"

(*Cage* 381). That "game," in all its largeness and complexity, is a fragmentary mystery that the

telegraphist seeks to make complete. In this sense, it becomes a sort of grand telegram, cryptic

and abridged, that can be deciphered, as Wright says "only by an effort of the imagination"

(Wright 175). Her impressions of Captain Everard and Lady Bradeen begin to define her

experience as

the fine soundless pulse of this game was in the air for our young woman while

they remained in the shop. While they remained? They remained all day; their

presence continued and abode with her, was in everything she did till nightfall, in

the thousands of other words she counted, she transmitted, in all the stamps she

detached and the letters she weighed and the change she gave (*Cage* 381).

As she becomes more immersed in the drama, trying to piece together the fragmentary visits

from and messages between Captain Everard and Lady Bradeen, their story becomes her own.

The narrative comes to be directed by her imagination; she "knew everything; she had made up

her mind" instantly with Captain Everard's first visit. She continues to accumulate impressions

from "in the shuffling herd" that came and went from day to day at the post office. For the

telegraphist, "the greater part" of that herd "only passed – a proportion but just appreciable

stayed" (*Cage* 390). She chooses which impressions will inform her narrative, and "[m]ost of the elements swam straight away, lost themselves in the bottomless common, and by doing so really kept the page clear. On the clearness therefore what she did retain stood sharply out; she nipped and caught it, turned it over and interwove it" (*Cage* 390). She becomes an artist, creating experience out of impressions; appreciating, appropriating, and establishing relations with her impressions in order to make them much more than that within her mind. By keeping the page clear of what she deems irrelevant to her creation, she is able to make much out of little – to provide her seed of a story with an opportunity to bloom.

However, as her impressions morph into her experience, for her they become something other than they are for the two characters at the center of her drama. She forgets the transparent barrier that separates her from the world outside of her "cage," that keeps her from being a part of the "large and complicated game" by which she is so captivated. Since she has already "made up her mind," the form of the story has been established; all of the bits and pieces she can acquire thereafter will be appropriated to fill in that predetermined shape, and that, for James, is where she limits herself as an artist. He explains that a "novel is in its broadest definition a personal impression of life; that, to begin with, constitutes its value, which is greater or less according to the intensity of the impression" ("Art" 4). The telegraphist's impression certainly has great potential to be intense, given the strength of her grain of observation, but, as James says, "there will be no intensity at all, and therefore no value, unless there is freedom to do and say. The tracing of a line to be followed, of a tone to be taken, of a form to be filled out, is a limitation of that freedom and a suppression of the very thing that we are most curious about" ("Art" 4). When the telegraphist begins to celebrate her knowledge rather than try to add to it, believing too strongly in her understanding of the situation, she limits the freedom that James

sees as essential for an effective narrative. As his visits become more frequent and, through his telegrams, his affair with Lady Bradeen becomes more apparent, the telegraphist reveals that she has fallen in love with the impression of Captain Everard she has developed within the cage. As soon as she believes herself to be "Captain Everard's telegraphic confidant" as well as his "charming secret," her story diverges from reality (*Cage* 425).

The telegraphist believes that her tact and intellect provide her with "ways to make her knowledge fairly protect and promote [her correspondents'] keeping, as she had heard Mrs. Jordan say, in touch" (*Cage* 418). In doing so, they allow the affair to persist and, as a result, her drama to continue to grow. She perceives herself to maintain an essential role in the relationship between Captain Everard and Lady Bradeen, and despite the immorality of such a part, she continues to fulfill it with the hopes that they might acknowledge her importance:

> when he actually sometimes smiled as if he really felt the awkwardness of giving
> her again one of the same old addresses, all her being went out in the desire –
> which her face must have expressed – that he should recognize her forbearance to
> criticize as one of the finest tenderest sacrifices a woman had ever made for love
> (*Cage* 418).

She believes in a "web of revelation that was woven between them" through which she has access to a wealth of knowledge about his affair, and she often wonders "what, with such a lot of material, a bad girl would do" (*Cage* 417). However, the narrator notes, "*she* was not a bad girl" (*Cage* 417). She mediates the relationship, and understands herself to be an integral part of it, but is apparently above the kind of immorality she might find in her ha'penny novels. She imagines "going to him in the dusk of evening at Park Chambers and letting him at last have it" for something that "wouldn't certainly be anything so gross as money," since only a "bad girl"

would engage in blackmail (*Cage* 417). When she does go to Park Chambers and meets Captain

Everard for the first time outside of the cage, she compares her knowledge to "a little hoard of

gold in her lap. Certainly he might look at it, handle it, take up the pieces. Yet if he understood

anything he must understand all" (*Cage* 437). For her, the fragments no longer exist separate of

each other; her knowledge has filled in the gaps between them to create a coherent narrative that

fits neatly within the form she establishes early on, and she fails to realize that that form might

create a disparity between her experience and everyone else's.

She expects Captain Everard to see things as she does, and in her narrative, she has

already decided that "she should never see him. She wanted it too much. There was a kind of

wanting that helped – she had arrived, with her rich experience, at that generalization; and there

was another kind that was fatal. It was this time the fatal kind; it would prevent" (*Cage* 381).

When she first starts to take a route home from work that will lead her past his apartment, she

worries that she might actually meet him, on which occasion she would be "whirled out on the

wings of a panic fear that he might just then be entering or issuing" (*Cage* 420-21). When they

do meet and she tells him, "I'd do anything for you," his reaction is not what she expects: he

begins to loiter about the post office as if he has taken her confession to heart. When she realizes

her error, "to be in the cage had suddenly become her safety, and she was literally afraid of the

alternate self who might be waiting outside. *He* might be waiting; it was he who was her

alternate self, and of him she was afraid" (*Cage* 469). Just as the Time Traveller becomes frantic

when the Time Machine goes missing and he finds himself facing the possibility that he may

never return to his laboratory, the telegraphist is fearful that she might lose control over her

carefully crafted narrative. Laura Otis explains, "[r]eality has jabbed into her imaginative web,

and she does not like the intrusion. Preferring to deal with Everard from within her cage, she

retreats into her imagination" (Otis 173). The knowledge and experience she creates are what she prefers; when she realizes that by leaving the post office she loses some of her creative freedom, she takes refuge where she can safely control her story. As she sits with Mrs. Jordan at the end of the novella, she realizes that "reality, for the poor things they both were, could only be ugliness and obscurity, could never be the escape, the rise" (*Cage* 499). The fragments of reality she sends and receives from within the cage are, for the telegraphist, a form of escapism, but they fail to be the escape.

What constitutes her experience – and *In the Cage* itself – stems from "her quite definitely winged intelligence," as James writes in the preface to the story (Preface [2] 10). He notes that "the action of the drama is simply the girl's 'subjective' adventure" rather than the 'objective' reality that provides her with her material, and in the end, it truly is her 'art' – the knowledge she creates – that "*makes* life, makes interest, makes importance" (*Henry James* 267). Like those of the governess in *The Turn of the Screw* and the Time Traveller in *The Time Machine*, the telegraphist's story demonstrates the human necessity for narrative. Since, in her "position," she is "forced to break language into component particles, the telegrapher is all too aware of her inability to form true personal, emotional bonds. While she denies it through most of the story, she realizes that in her cage, she "can know no one and nothing at all" (Otis 171). Her job provides her with cryptic and fragmentary components of a multitude of narratives, and to make up for this deficiency, she must make the imaginative effort to connect them. Roland Barthes writes that "narrative is international, transhistorical, transcultural: it is simply there, like life itself"; but for the telegraphist, it is absent (Barthes 251). She feels the void that this absence creates and, with the telegrams exchanged between Lady Bradeen and Captain Everard, attempts to fill it with a novelist's aptitude for observation.

Conclusion

The differences between James's and Wells's temperaments and training manifest themselves in the work produced by both authors during the last decade of the nineteenth century. They were part of the same *fin de siècle* culture that was fascinated by the uncanny, engaged with technology, and struggling to understand the role of humanity in a world that science had recently proven to be much larger and much older than anyone had ever thought possible. Each man's attempt to determine this role is at the heart of his fiction. While Wells believed that the answer lay somewhere within reach, just waiting to be discovered in a scientific breakthrough, James understood it to exist somewhere deep within the individual, somewhere that could not be measured or dated, that could only be discovered through personal exploration. As Wells writes in "An Evening at the Play," published in 1895:

> I swam in the common thought and feeling of my period, with an irregular abundance of rude knowledge, aggressive judgments and a disposition to get to close quarters with Madame Fact even if it meant to scuffle with her. James never scuffled with Fact; he treated her as a perfect and unchallengeable lady; he never questioned a single stitch or flounce of the conventions and interpretations in which she presented herself (Wells 46).

While Wells wanted to know, to explain, to reveal the "stitches" and "flounces" of Madame Fact, James wanted more to observe and to delight in his impression of her. These tendencies are what make their approaches to narrative fiction so incompatible, despite some important similarities that have allowed *The Time Machine, The Turn of the Screw,* and *In the Cage* to long outlive their authors.

The protagonists of *The Time Machine* and *In the Cage* both experience

technology as, in the words of Marshall McLuhan, "extensions of man."[6] The Time

Machine enables the Time Traveller to take bodily control of his experience of the Time

Dimension, making a distinction between the mental experience of time, which travels

"with a uniform velocity from the cradle to the grave," and the physical experience that is

not necessarily subject to the same linear path (*Time* 6). With the help of his invention,

the Time Traveller catapults himself into the future, overcoming what Friedrich Kittler

would call the "physiological deficiency" that had hitherto prevented the reconciliation of

his mental and physical experiences of time (Kittler 231). The novel itself, as Wells

understands it, has the potential to achieve a similar effect. Just as the number of days

the Time Traveller spends in the future is not equal to the number of days he is absent

from his laboratory, the amount of time an individual spends reading a novel is not equal

to the duration of the narrative with which he or she becomes engaged. The

immateriality of humans' mental existences, as the Time Traveller explains, means that

the capacity of the imagination is infinite – as are the past and the future which the Time

Machine makes it possible to inhabit. *The Time Machine* is a "narrative vehicle" that

"translates a faculty of mind – projective imagination – into an actual piece of

technology, and embodies it in time and space" (Warner xiii-xiv).

While *The Time Machine* uses technology to make the immaterial material, *In the*

Cage does the opposite: the telegraphist draws from telegrams, "abridged and cryptic"

fragments of experience, to create a system of impressions (Wright 175). As a key part

of the telegraph machine that sends and receives messages, she is in a unique 'position' –

"that of a young person spending, in a framed and wired confinement, the life of a

---

[6] from *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man,* first published in 1964.

guinea-pig or a magpie," where "she should know a great many persons without their

recognizing the acquaintance" (*Cage* 367). She has access to a wealth of experience and

impressions, and with the aid of her intelligence and imagination, finds herself "filling

out some of the gaps, supplying the missing answers" in the correspondence between

Captain Everard and Lady Bradeen. The governess in *The Turn of the Screw* must

exercise a similar freedom of imagination in order to determine the relationship between

the children and the ghosts at Bly – the same freedom that, Henry James writes in "The

Art of Fiction," "is a splendid privilege, and the first lesson of the young novelist is to be

worthy of it" ("Art" 11). Both women create meaningful narratives out of scattered and

ambiguous information, revealing the subjectivity of experience and, like the Time

Traveller, the power of the imagination to manipulate time and space.

Ambiguity is key to all three novellas. *The Time Machine* and *The Turn of the

Screw* confront it from the outset by presenting their tales within a narrative frame in

which the reliability of each story is openly questioned, and in *In the Cage*, the

telegraphist realizes the uncertainty of her own narrative when she begins to take on a

role in the story outside of the postal-telegraph office. However, as American author

Mark Z. Danielewski writes in *House of Leaves* more than a century after the publication

of *In the Cage*: "what's real or isn't real doesn't matter here. The consequences are the

same" (Danielewski xx). That statement has been true of fiction in all of its forms over

time, regardless of differences in genre, temperament, or training, and it is certainly true

of both Wells and James. James explains in a 1915 letter to Wells, "our form of

[literature] in especial is admirable exactly by its range and variety, its plasticity and

liberality, its fairly living on the sincere and shifting experience of the individual

practitioner" (James 266). The novel – a "system of impressions," according to Wells –

is true to life because it is through impressions that humanity gains experience

(*Experiment* 410). Regardless of how or whence those impressions come about, they

inform our knowledge of ourselves and the world around us. During the late-Victorian

era when that knowledge seemed to be challenged by new notions of time and space, both

Wells and James stress the importance of expanding and engaging with our own unique

"systems of impressions."

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