

Tina Victoria Wedmark

The Possible Evolution of Man

Speculative Fiction at the Turn of the 20th
Century

Student thesis in ENG2502 Texts, Culture, Context

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Faculty of Humanities
Department of Language and Literature



Human evolution has long been the subject of study by paleoanthropologists, who are interested in explaining how and why humans are what they are. Around the late nineteenth century when paleoanthropology began developing (Goodrum, 2014), a new type of literary genre gained popularity where one of the main literary devices was speculation. The genre, speculative fiction, naturally took inspiration from contemporary science as a subgenre of science fiction. With the upspring of new theories on evolution multiple authors began writing about the possible future evolution of man. H. G. Wells' *The Time Machine* is one of the earliest examples of speculative evolution. Another famous work is Olaf Stapledon's *Last and First Men* from 1930, where Stapledon thoroughly writes about a 2-million-year span of human history and notes all the changes that come to be within this time. The two books theorize on how the future man will look and function, and the authors influenced each other throughout their careers (Shelton, 1984, p.1). Their differences in writing on similar topics invite a conversation between them which can give more context to their works. In a sense they have worked alongside each other but at the same time not. Both the experiences of their time and the other's work have affected how the two books depict human evolution and their later writings.

The process of evolution is often long and tedious and applies to all animals on the planet. Foley, Martin, Lahr, and Stinger (2016) write how gradual changes exist in human evolution, but also transitional changes which diverges a species into different taxa. For example: «One half [of human evolution] comprises the evolution of what are usually referred to as the early hominins, those taxa that are closer to humans than living apes, but are generally placed in other genera than homo» (Foley, Martin, Lahr & Stinger, p.2, 2016). The change to bipedal motor is a transitional change which affects all taxa of hominins and differentiates the early human ancestors from other animals. Though such a transition is identifiable, the journal warns of placing similarities between species just on one fact alone. The different species all have unique evolutionary traits, and not all descend into homo sapiens sapiens. Foley, Martin, Lahr and Stinger (p.3, 2016) further writes «that hominin evolution is neither a simple punctuated process, nor a constant gradual one, but a complex interaction between variable rates of change, environmental dynamics and the competitive interactions of the hominins and their sympatric fellow-travellers in evolution.», focusing on the different hominins living alongside each other, and how those different species could affect the evolutionary traits. Though there exists transitional changes that signify specific evolution, it is not an accurate depictions of evolution as multiple factors, seemingly random effects, contribute to the transitional changes. These transitional changes are the groundwork for how

evolution develops, and both Wells and Stapledon incorporates transitional changes when depicting speculative evolution.

Chronologically H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine* exists as the first speculation of human evolution of the two works. In the book Wells (1895, p.25, p.47) describes two different species of the same taxon in the year 802 701 A.D. The first species introduced, Eloi, are described as docile, innocent and almost stupid beings. The other, Morlocks, as hideous, pale creatures of the dark. These transitional changes are theorized by the main character to be because of class difference taken to the extreme: “[..] I saw a real aristocracy, armed with a perfected science and working to a logical conclusion the industrial system of today. Its triumph had not been simply a triumph over nature, but a triumph over nature and the fellow man.” (Wells, 1895, p.49). Here Wells imagines a future where the class distinction has gone so far as to make the upperworld an inclusive, yet primitive utopia for the aristocrats of the past and the underground an abominable, closed-off prison for the lower classes, banished to a place without sun. Environmental dynamics have affected homo sapiens to diverge into two different evolutions. The main character realizes how the retrograded evolution of the Eloi, who no longer had the need for positive or effective human evolution because of the utopian conditions, is a transitional change impacted by the absence of competitive interactions. Therefore, their now ineffective attributes are sensible.

On the other hand, the Morlocks have strayed further from the original human, as the main character recognizes, because of their need to survive and adapt. “[..] there was the bleached look common in most animals that live largely in the dark [..] those large eyes, with that capacity for reflecting light [..] that evident confusion in the sunshine, that hasty yet fumbling and awkward flight towards dark shadows, and that peculiar carriage of the head while in the light [..]” (Wells, 1895, p.47). These descriptions of the Morlocks evident a long separation of the two species which would coincide with how transitional change often happens gradually with multiple factors affecting the evolution (Foley, Martin, Lahr, & Stinger, 2016, pp. 3-4). In this instance each evolutionary trait could be because of different factors, though most point to a habituation of the dark and is the factor which is mentioned the most. The evolution of Morlocks, who evolved because of extreme competitive interactions, compared with the Eloi, who evolved because of an absence of competitive interactions, show a dichotomy of the human evolution, and again depicts a clear-cut class difference taken to the extreme. Wells' description is simplified and exists without many external factors. The evolutionary timeline therefore becomes linear, which Foley, Martin, Lahr, & Stinger (2016) disagree with. This makes Wells' evolutionary timeline less probable, but acts more as a social

commentary on class struggle using the vehicle of evolution to make his point.

Wells' attempt at envisioning a future in *The Time Machine* (1895) is one of his earliest attempts at such speculative evolution. Wells would later in his career work copiously within this genre and, as Fritz (2010, p.213) mentions, incorporate Kant's psychological view on human history into the fictional future. These traits of Wells' writing can be observed in *The Time Machine* (1895), but are not fully developed as much as in his later works. Fritz (2010, p.213) describes the Kantian description of future cosmopolitan literature as «[...] the author's understanding of the underlying forces of history up to the present and taking the form of a speculative fiction.». Such a technique can be viewed in Wells' *The Time Machine* (1895) as he uses his understanding of the contemporary to build the pathway of time further in his writings. The main character comments on contemporary issues, as mentioned earlier, by speculating on how the human race could diverge into different taxa. Wells, as a prominent socialist (Stableford, 2003, p.24), takes the matter of class separation and applies it to evolutionary traits. He takes his understanding of history through the lens of socialism to speculate a future where contemporary issues materializes through evolution. Wells starts off with depicting the future as a utopia because of the contemporary habit to ignore the class struggle. Though, the main character still yearns to return back because the evolutionary docility understimulates his thirst for knowledge and progress (Wells, 1895, p.25). This takes into question how beneficial it would be to have a harmless environment and criticizes the easy-going nature of the upper class. On the other hand, the excess of competitive interactions, comparable with the exploitation, of the lower class creates a hostile evolutionary timeline not beneficial to the human race either. Both of the evolutions are commentaries on how a dichotomy, seen through a socialist lens, can work against humankind.

In the book *Last and First Men* Stapledon writes a very thorough history of the human future with a viewpoint of someone 2000 years after the last men. The book depicts several wars, uprisings, alien invasion, human bioengineering, and the multiple downfalls of the human race. It exists as a fluid interpretation of pessimism and optimism for the future. Throughout the book Stapledon marks the different evolutions by number and categorizes them into eighteen species, some in the same taxon while others so distanced from the first species they can be placed in different taxa. The first men are the ones most similar to what we would define as humans today, and their downfall may as well be a direct commentary on the vices of the contemporary man "The great majority were by nature too much obsessed by private impulses. And in this black period, such was the depth of disillusion and fatigue, that even normal resolution was impossible" (Stapledon, 1930, p.80). Stapledon speculates on the

corruption of man and writes of a transitional change because of the absence of purpose, leading to the first men's eventual demise. Such a transitional change stems from how "Every individual was a well-fed and physically healthy human animal. He was also economically independent. His working day was never more than six hours [...]. He enjoyed a fair share of the products of industry; and in his long holidays he was free to wander in his own aeroplane all over the planet." (Stapledon, 1930, p.64). All these variables work together in *Last and First Men* to force a human evolution by a decrease in purpose and subsequent action coupled with the problem of dwindling resources and an intelligent complacent population. This leads to both mental and environmental effects, forcing human adaptation as the population becomes smaller and splits up. This would be in accordance with Foley, Martin, Lahr, & Stinger's (2016, p. 2) theory on multifaceted transitions in human evolution. Stapledon incorporates variable rates of change in his speculative evolution and combines those to a probable result to create a believable evolutionary timeline.

It is not only in the first men Stapledon uses proven evolutionary factors. The first men split up as they face a broken and unfamiliar world where many devolve into barbarism. The few still categorized as humans adapt to harsh surroundings and are subjugated to competitive interactions. After a millennium there appeared certain evolutionary traits, similar to transitional changes. One of the variables in the environment which lead to this was the emergence and subsequent loss of Patagonia, a new resource rich land mass previously covered by sea. Though the physical unhealthy body was inherited, they rejected the mental inclinations which led to the previous civilization's downfall (Stapledon, 1930, p.115). The obsession the first men had with individuality is switched on its head with the second men, as they instead prioritize the group as a social entity of a combined purpose. But Stapledon also questions this type of evolution as it goes from one extreme to the other. He explicitly comments on this: "[...] and though they enjoyed long ages of idyllic peace, [...] their progress to full self-conscious mastery of the planet was curiously slow." (Stapledon, 1930, p.118). While the first men may not have lived in peace, they did manage to further develop mankind through industrialized resources. Although this "mastery of the planet" is not sustainable and neglects the inclination towards mental unhealth in the first men, the mental capabilities and consciousness of the second men results in the opposite where mankind lacks the capabilities for resourcefulness. Similar to Wells Stapledon's speculative evolution exists as a commentary on how extreme dichotomies only lead to other extreme dichotomies with essentially the same issue but different variables.

Later in Stapledon's timeline the human species will experience one of the biggest

interspecies amalgamations as the particles of the Martian clouds merge with human DNA, speculating of an extreme future environment with interspecies evolution. The speciation of the third men features an adaptability to sentient Martian cloud mass spread across the land resulting from an invasion and war between the two sentients (Stapledon, 1930, p.170).

Although Stapledon does not only equate the adaptations to the cloud mass as the focal point of evolution, but rather the combination of this adaptability with climatic and geographical changes which trigger a specific chemical interaction resulting in a new species. Though such an evolution might seem absurd, it does coincide with some evolutionary traits identified in Foley, Martin, Lahr, & Stinger (2016, p. 3). They posit that evolution does not exist as a unilateral chain of events. Instead creatures evolve alongside each other, like Stapledon writes with the Martians and the second men, and consists of multiple transitions. Here Stapledon does an excellent job of speculating in an incredibly scientific way. In accordance with modern science, Stapledon presents multiple transitional changes that all work together to create new speciation, not as a result of a single transition but multiple transitions over millennia of years.

Stapledon's implementation of science is evident throughout the book and exists as a focal point in creating a believable evolutionary history. His peers at the time were focused on how the future will reveal a utopia (Cole, 1973, p.89), and although Stapledon creates a utopia of the future he quickly tears them down into a dystopia by means of natural selection. This fluctuation of prosperity and hardship is Stapledon's understanding of evolution and history as he has shown to subscribe to Darwinism (Stone-Blackburn, 1997, p.194). He does a great job in depicting human evolution and making it believable in regard to paleoanthropological research because of this. Additionally, he starts at a point most contemporary humans can recognize and uses known vices to speculate on how evolution might affect it. All the evolutionary traits Stapledon describes are results from different variables mankind has to deal with. He writes in a way that makes everything connected, and the different variables become precursors to more variables. Because of this the evolutionary process becomes understandable in a logical sense, but at the same time incredibly difficult to keep track of. Stapledon writes in a wide context, taking inspiration from real life. Although a singular evolutionary trait might not make sense out of context, Stapledon creates a reality hard to logically fault or disagree with.

Comparing the two exhibits vast similarities between their depiction of the future. The two have affected each other by dialogue with each other and the time period they live in. Shelton (1984, p.1) writes how Stapledon was inspired by Wells' books, though not

specifically *The Time Machine* (1895) but a later work called *War of the Worlds* (1898). Their focus on the possibility of intergalactic species and the human nature of skepticism followed by the intuition to destroy otherness is reflective of the socio-political environment they were writing in. The turn of the 20th century saw an increase in mortality from war following technological advancements from the industrial revolution. Mankind has always been prone to engaging in war, yet not at the same scope that was possible during this period (Kekes, 2010, p.202). Authors of speculative evolution often need to view the past in a timeline and find similarities in how to construct a fictional future. Both of the authors existed in a time period where war and fighting had advanced to a point of brutality that it would be impossible to not be affected by it. Evidently both of them have written a future where humankind dooms themselves by needless killing and unnecessary conflict, be it violently or socially.

In addition, both of the authors have taken into consideration the effect of geographical circumstances when writing speculative evolution. In Wells' (1895, p.47) work the subterranean environment of the darkness is part of the reason for the Morlocks' evolutionary traits. Similarly, Stapledon (1930, p 83) also writes, as mentioned earlier, how the geographical circumstance of a new landmass would force evolutionary traits within all inhabiting species. Both of them utilize similar techniques in order to speculate mankind's evolution, resulting in different stories yet analogous overarching themes. Both focus on how human interaction can have greater impact on the world. In *The Time Machine* it is speculated that the reason for a subterranean speciation is human politics going too far, as mentioned earlier. In *First and Last Men* it is with the overuse of resources that the first men end up doomed, without knowing how to adapt to such a quick, man-made change they are forced to adapt which results in evolutionary transitions. Both of the transitions made in the books can be linked to human interaction in some way. Therefore, the two authors seem to agree upon the fact that humans will cause transitions and change, though often not for the better.

Olaf Stapledon's career being later than Wells' gives him an edge in speculative fiction as he has a greater archive to take inspiration from. As talked about previously, Shelton (1985, p.2) posits that Stapledon directly took inspiration from Wells' *War of the Worlds* (1898). He goes on to write how the different species of Stapledon takes multiple inspirations from Wells' different works and implements his theories throughout the book (Shelton, 1985, p.4-8). Stapledon is heavily influenced by Wells' work and one can almost experience the fine-tuning done by Stapledon of Wells' early speculative evolution when reading *The Time Machine* and *Last and First Men* sequentially. Because of this Stapledon has the opportunity to build a fairly encompassing speculation compared with *The Time Machine*. Stone-Blackburn (1997,

p.194) theorizes on Stapledon's writing style in *Last and First Men* and showcases how he almost excessively implements Darwinism in all of his speciation. She further presents Darwinian criticism aimed at Stapledon as his work revels in evolutionary brutality with few expectations of hope and mankind struggling with survival. This viewpoint, according to Stone-Blackburn (1997, p.196) albeit negative and heavily criticized, has evidenced an accurate speculation as modern science has proven to coincide with Stapledon's speculative evolution. This accuracy can be attributed to his greater corpora of speculative evolution, as it existed as a fairly new genre when Wells started writing, and with the scientific advances made in regard to Darwinism. The time period in which Stapledon wrote was extra beneficial to his speculative fiction and leaves Wells' earlier work lackluster in comparison. Though Wells manages to create as believable speculative evolution as Stapledon, it is written with different influences from a different time period creating a different storyline.

Evidenced by the previous examples they both have a semi-pessimistic view of the future as they implement their understanding of history into their speculation of the future. Since both of them come from a time when military science was at an all-time high and warfare was not uncommon, it is understandable that they would emulate such traits in their speculative evolutions. These traits are extremely common when analyzing real-world war trends, as Leblanc (2003, xi-xii as cited in Kekes, 2010, p.204) puts it: "Much of today's warfare reads just like the warfare of tens of thousands of years ago." It then makes sense that both authors would implement war as an evolutionary transition in their works since history shows how war repeats itself, and how it always will be a part of human nature. Though in Wells' work it is not explicitly said that war was the cause of the speciation of different taxa, though it is implied that the two species have disagreements which could have resulted from war. Part of the reason why Wells decides to refrain from giving a proper explanation for the evolution is perhaps because he wishes to encourage the reader to speculate and ponder over what can go wrong in the future. Whereas Stapledon lays it out beautifully and meticulously, almost holding your hand throughout future history, Wells presents a story up for interpretation. Much like the viewpoint of the narrator, as it is from a time traveler only telling his experiences, the listener, or reader, is challenged with understanding how and why the future is what it is. Though Wells does include some of his socialistic viewpoints as mentioned earlier. The two of them present the future in different ways, but still a sense of pessimism characterizes their stories in a way that leaves the reader passive to the future. Throughout reading the two books a feeling of intrigue, hopelessness, and curiosity about the future all can be experienced, which stems from writing which understands history, real-life

obstacles, and evolutionary transitions.

The Time Machine and *Last and First Men* are two examples of what the future man can be. As works in speculative evolution it is understandable that they do not perfectly coincide with paleoanthropological studies. *The Time Machine* evidences less focus on the science of transitional changes and evolutionary traits, but rather questions the aftermath of such possible human evolution viewed under a socialist lens. The book does include speciation that aligns with paleoanthropological research, but that is not what the work wishes to uncover. Instead, the aftermath and how to cope with a regressed semi-dystopian future is what the work wishes to uncover and puts the reader in a speculative mindset themselves. On the other hand, Stapledon neatly organizes all the reasons and variables as to how future mankind's speciation evolves. Though it gives less room for reader speculation, it presents a fascinating future almost as believable as the history books of the past. With his subscription to Darwinism and pessimistic view on mankind's struggle to survive he is able to logically create environmental, gradual, and interspecies factors that contribute to the evolution of the future. Throughout the two books, there exists some similarities in how the authors view history and evolution and Stapledon has been proven to be inspired by Wells' early work. Both Wells and Stapledon have given great contributions to the genre of speculative evolution and presents realistic ideas about the future and future man, which most interestingly can be compared to real life as time passes. Their depictions of the future man vastly differ, but where they do coincide is with their theorizing on how mankind ended up at a point of major evolutionary change. Though their works are mere fiction it is speculation taken to its most scientific, both natural and social, point, resulting in a truth yet to be lived or a lie yet to be read.

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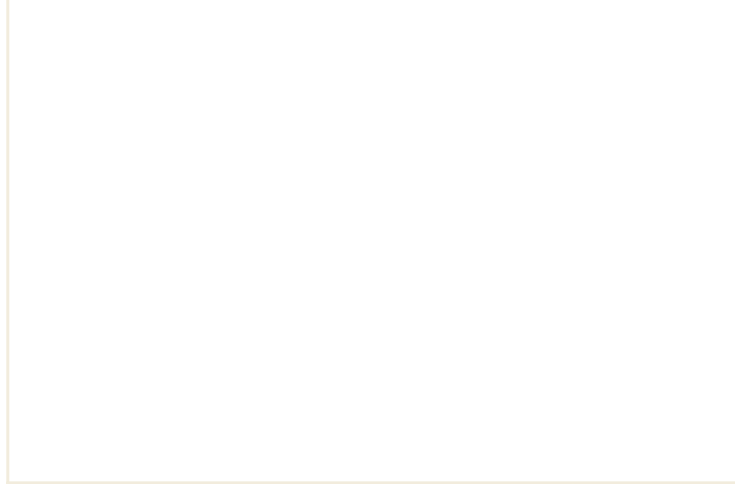
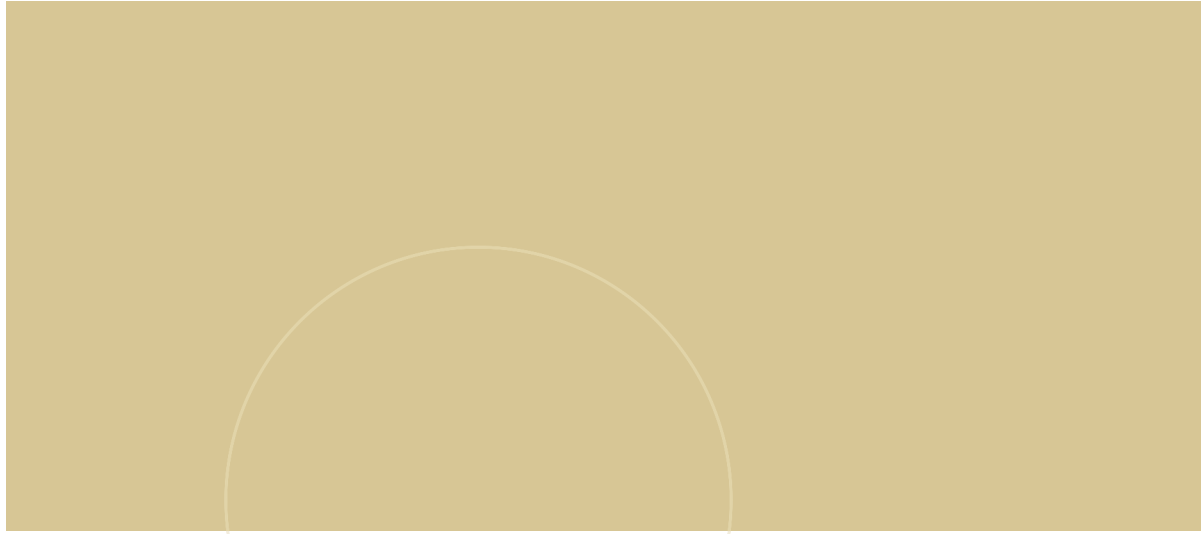
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