



# The Time Machine

Herbert George Wells







**R A I N B O W S**

Herbert George Wells

# The Time Machine

Adaptation, dossiers and activities  
by Raffaele Polichetti



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# The Time Machine

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# The Author

## Herbert George Wells



**Herbert George Wells** (1866-1946) was born in Bromley (Greater London), where his father was an unsuccessful shopkeeper. His difficult early life is reflected in the struggles<sup>1</sup> of the protagonists of his novels. In 1874, he had a serious accident that left him bedridden<sup>2</sup> for a long time. He started reading books from the local library. They stimulated his desire to write, so he decided that he would become a writer. After two unhappy years as an apprentice<sup>3</sup>, Wells became a student assistant at Midhurst Grammar School. From here, in 1884, he won a scholarship to the Normal School of Science, London. Before taking a degree in zoology in 1890, he had started the life of a school teacher again. His first full-length works were textbooks of biology and geography. In 1891 he began an unhappy marriage to his cousin Isabel; his second marriage in 1895 to Amy Robbins lasted all his life.

He was, like his friend George B. Shaw, an active member of the Fabian Society<sup>4</sup> and a man deeply concerned with<sup>5</sup> the political problems of his time. A brilliant, highly imaginative and productive writer, he published about fifty novels that can be divided into three groups corresponding approximately to three distinct phases in his literary career.

The first group includes his scientific or fantastic romances, in the manner of Jules Verne, but on a higher level of artistic realization. His literary career began with the publication of his first major novel, *The Time Machine* (1895), followed by *The Island of Dr Moreau* (1896), *The Invisible Man* (1897), *The War of the Worlds* (1898), *When the*

1. *struggle*: fight, effort to achieve something.
2. *bedridden*: having to stay in bed because of illness or injury.
3. *apprentice*: a young person who works for an employer for a fixed period of time in order to learn the particular skills needed in their job.
4. *Fabian Society*: a British socialist organisation whose purpose is to advance the principles of democratic socialism. As founders of the Labour Party in 1900, it has influenced British policy to the present day.
5. *concerned with*: involved in, interested in.

*Sleeper Wakes* (1899), *The First Men in the Moon* (1901). These novels are about the impact of alien races or advanced science on established society and their heroes are often nameless and powerless in the face of natural forces. Because of their satire and their implicit note of warning, these works can be considered an early sign of Wells's later worry about the social and political situation.

The second group includes comic novels, such as *Love and Mrs Lewisham* (1900), *Kipps* (1905) and *The History of Mr Polly* (1910).

The third and last group is made of the novels of ideas, which showed the didactic tendency in Wells: *A Modern Utopia* (1905), *Tono-Bungay* (1909), *The New Machiavelli* (1911), *Mrs Britling Sees It Through* (1916), *Men Like Gods* (1923), *The World of William Clissold* (1926).

There is no doubt the best of Wells can be found in the scientific romances and the comic novels, while his novels of ideas are today out of date and generally neglected<sup>6</sup>.

He was nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1921, 1932, 1935 and 1946.

At the end of his life, his contemporary political impact was limited. His efforts regarding the League of Nations became a disappointment<sup>7</sup> as the organization turned out to be a weak one, unable to prevent World War II. The war itself increased the pessimistic side of his nature.

In his last book, *Mind at the End of Its Tether* (1945), he considered favourably the possibility that humanity was replaced by another species. He also called the era "the age of frustration".

Wells died on 13<sup>th</sup> August, 1946, while working on a project that dealt with the dangers of nuclear war.

A commemorative plaque in his honour was installed at his home in Regent's Park, London.



First edition cover

6. *neglected*: forgotten, not receiving attention.

7. *disappointment*: cause for sadness because something has not happened.





## BEFORE READING

- 1 What does the title *The Time Machine* suggest to you?
- 2 During dinner at his house, the narrator talks about the four dimensions: one is temporal (time) and the other three are spatial. What are the space dimensions called? Underline the correct option.
  - a. height, width, depth;
  - b. height, length, width;
  - c. height, thickness, width.
- 3 The following quotation by the physicist and cosmologist Stephen Hawking is about Einstein's Theory of Relativity and the consequent possibility of time travel. Fill in the blanks choosing from the words in the box.

possibility • return • science • space • Theory • travel

"Time (1)..... used to be thought of as just (2)..... fiction, but Einstein's General (3)..... of Relativity allows for the (4)..... that we could deform (5)..... -time so much that you could go off in a rocket and (6)..... before you had set out!"



A scene from the 1960 film *The Time Machine* directed and produced by George Pal.



# The Time Traveller

## Chapter 1

Every Thursday we used to have dinner at our friend's house in Richmond. He was one of those men who are too clever to be believed: you always suspected some smart<sup>1</sup> trick<sup>2</sup> behind his logical explanations based on Physics and its precise rules. On one of these occasions, he explained to us a complicated theory based on space and time, in which time was to be considered the fourth dimension. He added that he was going to try to travel into the past and the future using a device<sup>3</sup> he had built all by himself. It couldn't move in space but, he claimed<sup>4</sup>, was able to travel in time!

He showed us the Time Machine in his laboratory. The thing was generally complete, apart from the bars<sup>5</sup>, which looked unfinished. I took one for a better look at it. It seemed to be quartz, whereas parts of the machine were of nickel, parts of ivory<sup>6</sup> and others of rock crystal.

"This machine took two years to make," said he. "When this handle<sup>7</sup> on the right is pressed, it sends the machine into the future; this handle on the left reverses the motion, that is, it makes it move in the opposite direction; and this is the traveller's seat in front of which you can see the flight instruments."

There was a moment's silence. We looked at one another rather puzzled and unbelieving<sup>8</sup>.

"Are you really serious?" said the Doctor.

"I've never been more serious in my life!" replied our friend in a resolute way. "In that machine I intend to explore time! Is that clear?"

1. *smart*: clever, intelligent.
2. *trick*: an action that is intended to deceive.
3. *device*: machine, apparatus.
4. *claimed*: asserted, said.
5. *bar*: a long, thin, straight piece of metal.

6. *ivory*: the hard yellowish-white substance that forms the tusks of some animals such as elephants.
7. *handle*: part of an object designed for holding, moving, or carrying the object.
8. *unbelieving*: sceptical.

## The Time Machine

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Then he asked us to meet him at his place the following Thursday.

I think that at the time none of us quite believed in the Time Machine and I do not think any of us said much about time travelling between that Thursday and the next. However, on the following Thursday, I went to Richmond again and found four friends in the sitting-room. I asked them,

“It’s half past seven, where’s our host<sup>9</sup>?”

The Doctor replied,

“He isn’t here but he left a note where he asks us to begin dinner if he’s not back. He says, ‘I will explain when I come’.”

“Well,” said the Psychologist, “let’s start dinner then!” And he rang the bell for the servant.

We started eating and chatting in the usual friendly and lively way. Half joking I said,

“Our host’s absence is due to his time travelling... I wonder where he is now.”

Everybody chuckled<sup>10</sup> and the Publisher said smiling,

“I’m sure our friend is travelling in the past, he’s always loved History and Archaeology.”

The Lawyer gave him an amused look and declared solemnly,

“He is a man of Science, so no doubt he is in the future to see Man’s technological developments!”

“Oh, come on...,” intervened the Doctor, “all this is nonsense! Time travelling in the past..., in the future... What are you talking about? Our host is late just because he’s having a romantic rendezvous!”

Everybody started to laugh when suddenly the door opened slowly and our friend appeared before us. I gave a cry of surprise and the Doctor exclaimed,

“Good heavens, man! What’s the matter?”

All the men at the table turned towards the door. Our friend was in a terrible state. His coat was dusty and dirty; his hair was disordered and it seemed to me greyer – either with dust and dirt

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9. *host*: a person who invites guests to a meal, a party, etc. or who has

people staying at their house.

10. *chuckled*: laughed quietly.



Rod Taylor; the Time Traveller; in the 1960 film version.

or because it had lost its colour. His face was as pale as a ghost; his chin had a cut on it; he had a very tired and pained<sup>11</sup> expression. For a moment he hesitated in the doorway, he put a hand in front of his eyes as if he were blinded by the light. Then he came into the room walking with a limp<sup>12</sup>. We stared<sup>13</sup> at him in silence, expecting him to speak.

He did not say a word but walked painfully to the table and pointed to the wine. The Publisher filled a glass and pushed it towards him. He drank it in one swallow<sup>14</sup> and it seemed to do him good.

“What on earth have you been doing, man?” asked the Doctor.

“Don’t... don’t worry,” he said with difficulty. “I’m... I’m all right... now.”

He held out his glass for more wine and drank it in a swallow again. His eyes became brighter and a little colour came into his cheeks. Then he spoke again, still with some difficulty.

“I’m going... I’m going to wash and dress... and then I’ll come down and explain things... Save me some of that... of that meat. I’m starving<sup>15</sup> for a bit of meat. I feel a bit, let’s say, strange. I’ll be all right in a minute.”

He put down his glass and walked towards the door. Again I noticed he was walking with a limp and saw he had no shoes on, only a pair of torn<sup>16</sup>, blood-stained socks. Then the door closed.

“What’s the matter?” said the Lawyer. “Is he playing a game?”

“Has our friend got a second job? Does he go out and earn money as a road cleaner?” asked the Publisher jokingly<sup>17</sup>.

“I’m sure it’s this business of the Time Machine,” I said.

“I see, but don’t they have any clothes-brushes in the Future?” inquired the Psychologist light-heartedly<sup>18</sup>. Our laughter was interrupted by the return of our host. He was dressed in ordinary evening clothes and still had his tired, strange look.

11. *pained*: suffering.

12. *limp*: a way of walking slowly and with difficulty because of having an injured or painful leg or foot.

13. *stared*: looked fixedly.

14. *in one swallow*: in one gulp, very quickly.

15. *starving*: dying because of not having enough food.

16. *torn*: cut open.

17. *jokingly*: in a way that is intended to be amusing and not serious.

18. *light-heartedly*: in a happy and not serious way.

## The Time Traveller



He was dressed in ordinary evening clothes...

“I say,” exclaimed the Publisher, “these gentlemen here say you’ve been travelling into the future! Tell us who’s going to win at the general political election next year, will you? And how much money you want for the whole story.”

Our friend came to the table without a word. He smiled quietly in his old way.

“Where’s my meat?” he asked. “How lovely it is to eat some meat again!”

“Story!” cried the Publisher.

“I want something to eat. I won’t say a word until I’ve got something in my stomach. The salt? Thanks.”

“Just one word,” said I. “Have you been time travelling?”

“Yes,” said he with his mouth full, nodding his head<sup>19</sup>.

The Time Traveller (as I will call him from now on) pushed his glass towards the Psychologist and made it ring with his fingernail; the Psychologist poured<sup>20</sup> him some wine.

19. **nodding his head:** moving his head down and then up especially to show agreement.

20. **poured:** made a liquid (wine) flow from a container (bottle) into another smaller container (glass).

## TIME TRAVEL

### Fantasy vs. science fiction

**Fantasy** is a fiction genre that uses magic or other supernatural elements as a main plot<sup>1</sup> element, theme or setting<sup>2</sup>. Many works within the genre take place in imaginary worlds where magic and magical creatures are common and have no basis in science. On the other hand,

**science fiction** deals with scenarios and technology that are possible or may be possible, based on science. Some science fiction, such as far-future space opera<sup>3</sup> or **time travel** stories, may seem implausible<sup>4</sup>, but they are still not beyond the realm of scientific theory. However, there is a great deal of overlap<sup>5</sup> between these genres.



*Star Wars*' main characters.

### Verne and Wells

Written thirty years before the term science fiction was used, *The Time Machine* (1895) was the first novel to deal with the intriguing subject of **time travel**. H.G.Wells had considered the notion of **time travel** before 1895, in a short story titled *The Chronic Argonauts* (1888), which was the foundation for *The Time Machine*.

In Jonathan Swift's tradition, Wells can also be considered a novelist of political satire (see Extension 4), but mostly a father of science fiction, along with Jules Verne (1828-1905). The French novelist is known mainly for his numerous science fiction works, such as *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, *A Journey to the Centre of the Earth* and *Around the World in Eighty Days*. In these novels, Verne actually wrote about space, air and underwater travel long before the means of transport to carry out such journeys were invented. Jules Verne was particularly focused

1. *plot*: the story of a book, film, play, etc.
2. *setting*: the time and the place in which the action of a book, film, play, etc. happens.
3. *space opera*: a subgenre of science fiction that emphasizes space warfare, melodramatic adventure, interplanetary
4. *implausible*: not seeming reasonable or likely to be true.
5. *overlap*: the amount by which two things or activities cover the same area.



on technical details, and it is said that the submarine ship he wrote about in *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* can be built based on his descriptions alone, thanks to his precise detail and accuracy. Wells, for his part, was not so focused on the technical aspects and he was often the subject of criticism from Verne because of this.



Walt Disney's *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*.

## Wells and Einstein

*We can easily move in space:* right and left, backwards and forwards, up and down. But can we really move or **travel in time**?

Albert Einstein (1879-1955) provided the basis for much of the theoretical science that today guides most **time travel** research – some scientists, in fact, believe **time travel** is possible. In Einstein's *Theory of Relativity*, time and three-dimensional space are treated together as a single four-dimensional system called space-time. Each event in space-time has four coordinates:  $x$ ,  $y$ ,  $z$ ,  $t$  axes. Had Einstein read *The Time Machine*?

On April 15, 1929, the German Reichstag (Parliament) invited Wells to give a talk to the assembly. Einstein was invited as an honoured guest. On that occasion, two of the most illustrious thinkers of 20<sup>th</sup> century met. Although *The Time Machine* was widely read, there is no evidence<sup>6</sup> that Einstein and Wells ever discussed the fourth dimension. But what we know for certain is that Einstein was a bookworm<sup>7</sup>...



A. Einstein (at left) is seated next to Education Minister K. Becker, H.G. Wells and Reichstag President P. Löbe, at far right. (Image credit: © Ullstein Bild / VOSTOCK Photo)

6. *evidence*: the facts, signs or objects that make you believe that something is true.

7. *bookworm*: a person who likes reading a lot.





# The Time Machine

*A brilliant inventor has built a machine which can move in the fourth dimension – time. He travels to the remote future where he meets gentle and graceful people with little intelligence and no emotions. Owing to the disappearance of his machine, the Time Traveller realizes that humanity has evolved into two completely distinct species...*

*The book is enriched by stimulating inserts about Travel in Time, Science Fiction and Utopias.*

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Teacher's Resources available on line:  
Answer Key, Audioscripts, Summing-up Activities.