

The "True Riddle of the Sphinx" in "The Time Machine"

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NOTES AND CORRESPONDENCE

The “True Riddle of the Sphinx” in *The Time Machine*. Numerous scholars have debated the significance of H.G. Wells’s Sphinx. Edward Shanks prefers mythic to allegorical readings of Wells’s early romances, especially *The Time Machine* and *The Island of Dr. Moreau*: “whereas an allegory bears a single and definite interpretation, a myth does not, but can be interpreted in many ways, none of them quite consistent, all of them more alive and fruitful than the rigid allegorical correspondence” (qtd. in Bergonzi 42). Recent scholars have largely approached *The Time Machine* as a myth, and the mythic image of the White Sphinx has inspired interesting scholarly discussions of its meaning and Wells’s reasons for using the image.¹

Most obviously, it derives from the Sphinx of the Oedipus myth. As David Ketterer notes, “The presence of the Sphinx suggests that, like Oedipus, the Time Traveller must solve a riddle” (340). The original riddle of the Sphinx centers on an analogy between a solar day and the duration of an individual human life: in the morning or infancy, man “walks” (crawls) on four legs; at mid-day or adulthood, on two legs; and in the evening, or old age, on three (using a cane). One way to interpret the Sphinx in *The Time Machine* is to extend this analogy to human evolution, as David Lake does when he argues that because the “rise and fall of Man” is the primary subject of the novella, the Sphinx, “this leprous, crumbling sphinx,” “represents the ‘three-legged’ stage, the decay of Man in the future world” (78). Yet one could argue upon good textual evidence that in this story the day of Man has ended, the individual has died, and Man is already extinct. As the Time Traveller remarks, “even the mere memory of Man as I knew him had been swept out of existence” (71).

Frank Scafella also mentions the connection between the White Sphinx and the Sphinx of the Oedipus myth: “*The Time Machine* must be a variation of Oedipus’s encounter with the Sphinx on the road to Thebes” (255). Scafella’s primary concern, however, is with the connection between the Sphinx and science: he cites Sir Francis Bacon’s essay on the Sphinx (printed in *De Sapientia Veterum Liber* [1609]). Bacon, he notes, links the Sphinx to science; the riddle is thus essentially an inquiry about the nature of knowledge. Given this link between the Sphinx and science or epistemology, Scafella argues “certain parallels between that fable [i.e., the Oedipus myth] and the Time Traveller’s adventures are direct and highly suggestive of the emergence, establishment, and predicament of the scientist in the modern world” (255). Scafella’s is a valuable addition to the discussion concerning the Sphinx: playing Wells off against Bacon, he has augmented critical appreciation of *The Time Machine* as a scientific romance (256).

Leon Stover, in his critical edition of *The Time Machine*, argues that the White Sphinx represents the Sphinx of Thomas Carlyle’s *Past and Present*. Borrowing from two related sections in “The Sphinx”—Chapter 4 of *Past and Present*—Stover defines the riddle of the Sphinx as the

immense problem of Organizing Labour, first of all Managing the Working Classes, [which] will, it is very clear, have to be solved by those that stand practically in the middle of it; by those who themselves work and preside over work." This "'Organization of Labour' is, if well understood, the Problem of the whole Future, for all men" who in future pretend to govern men. (3)

So while Stover's reading is consistent with an interpretation of Wells's novel that is often made—Wells emphasizes the class division and labor problems facing Victorian England—he identifies an alternative source for Wells's Sphinx in Thomas Carlyle.

Two other Wells scholars have briefly considered the significance of the Sphinx. David C. Smith remarks upon the Sphinx "statue," parenthetically describing it as evoking "a sort of Ozymandias motif" (59). And Bernard Bergonzi has alluded to the use of the Sphinx as a familiar and popular image of Wells's day. But while Bergonzi correctly points out that the Sphinx "was a familiar object in *fin-de-siècle* iconography"—citing Oscar Wilde's poem "The Sphinx" (1894) and other works to support his claim—he relegates his discussion to a brief note, ignoring other possible sources for the White Sphinx (Bergonzi 1961, 217 note 43).

If David Lake is correct when he observes "This Sphinx really does dominate the story," he is also right to argue that "Bergonzi's interpretation of [the Sphinx] as a typical *fin-de-siècle* motif is insufficient" (77). I agree that, although the Sphinx has been the central topic of scholars writing from a variety of critical perspectives, the discussion remains incomplete.

I believe that scholars have overlooked one important source for Wells's sinister and ominous image: a passage from T.H. Huxley's "The Struggle for Existence: A Programme." The influence of Huxley on Wells's philosophical outlook, especially as it concerns evolution, is well known—as Patrick Parrinder says: "if Huxley was the classical philosopher of evolution, his pupil was its romantic poet" (18). And David C. Smith, arguing upon good evidence that *The Time Machine* "was written for T.H. Huxley," states that Wells's intent "was putting evolutionary theory into fictional practice" (48).²

In my reading, the influence of Huxley can be seen quite specifically in Wells's Sphinx: Wells echoes a passage in Huxley's article that more directly bears on Wells's choice of this image than the Oedipus myth, Carlyle's *Past and Present*, or Bacon's "Sphinx; or Science." After arguing that the object of society is to limit the "struggle of existence," Huxley writes that

however shocking to the moral sense this eternal competition of man against man and of nation against nation may be; however revolting may be the accumulation of misery at the negative pole of society, in contrast with that of monstrous wealth at the positive pole; this state of things must abide, and grow continually worse, so long as Istar holds her way unchecked. It is the true riddle of the Sphinx; and every nation which does not solve it will sooner or later be devoured by the monster itself has generated.³ (169)

Huxley, "classical philosopher of evolution," redefines for his former student

"the true riddle of the Sphinx," which has not yet been solved. Indeed, ignoring the riddle, the descendants of the Victorian Capitalists as Wells imagines them, the Eloi, are devoured by the Morlocks, the laboring monster that Victorian society has generated.

For Wells, the "true riddle of the Sphinx" is reducible to the following question: "How can man be stirred out of his complacency?" A clue to Wells's answer can be found in comparing another passage from "The Struggle for Existence" to *The Time Machine*. Huxley writes that "Pessimism is as little consonant with the facts of sentient existence as optimism" (164). The Time Traveller is too much of a pessimist, and so he appropriately disappears entirely from the universe of the story, probably to look for the Golden Age in some remote past era. The anonymous narrator, on the other hand, is too optimistic. His response to the Time Traveller's conclusion that human civilization will eventually destroy itself is pitifully inadequate: "it remains for us to live as though it were not [true]" (90). Indeed, in my reading of *The Time Machine*, the narrator represents the widespread optimistic complacency that Wells would spend the rest of his life denouncing.

Identifying Huxley's "Struggle for Existence" as a direct source for Wells's White Sphinx in *The Time Machine* enriches our understanding of his scientific romance and reinforces one common interpretation of the meaning of the Sphinx—it prompts the Time Traveller to speculate that the degenerate Eloi and Morlocks have evolved from the capitalist and laboring classes. Certainly the White Sphinx is a futuristic revision of the Sphinx of the Oedipus myth, and its connections to Bacon's and Carlyle's Sphinxes of science and the problem of organizing labor, respectively, are important. But the most direct and significant source for the Sphinx comes from Wells's teacher and mentor, Thomas H. Huxley.—**John S. Prince, Ball State University**

NOTES

1. See Bernard Bergonzi, "From *The Chronic Argonauts* to *The Time Machine*," in *The Early H. G. Wells: A Study of the Scientific Romances* (Manchester: U of Manchester P, 1961) 23-61, and a revision of this chapter, "The Time Machine: An Ironic Myth," in *H. G. Wells: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: 1976) 39-55. See also Robert J. Begiebing, "The Mythic Hero in H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine*," *Essays in Literature* 11 (1984): 201-10.

2. Smith cites a brief letter from Wells to Huxley, dated May 1895, which Wells sent to Huxley, enclosing a copy of *The Time Machine*. Huxley saved the letter and it can be found in *Huxley Papers-General*, Vol. 28, Imperial College of Science, London, 233-34. The letter is reprinted (as letter 224) in David C. Smith, ed., *The Correspondence of H. G. Wells*, Vol. 1. (London: Pickering, 1998), 238.

3. The Goddess Istar, with her "terrible aspect" (164), represents Nature as a cruel and malevolent force. Huxley incorporates this ancient mythical image to stand for the view of Nature espoused by nineteenth-century Naturalism. Nature and civilization are at odds with one another, and the "struggle" resulting from the class division between capital and labor only helps to advance Istar's agenda, to the detriment of human civilization.

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Report from a Grand Master. I have just returned from New York. There I received the title Grand Master of Science Fiction. The awarding authority is SFWA—the Science Fiction Writers of America. Every year, as you know, voting takes place for various literary awards: best novel, best short story, best media presentation, and so on. Occasionally other awards are made, as was the case this year. On Saturday May 20th, Daniel Keyes was instituted as Writer Emeritus, and I was elected Grand Master. I heard there was some intensive lobbying for this title by other writers. If so, they were disappointed. I knew nothing about the vote until the decision was carried.

The awards ceremony was held at a banquet at the Crowne Plaza Hotel in Times Square, New York: five hundred people attended, including writers, publishers, editors, media guys, and literary agents. The speeches were more intellectual, more amusing, more full of a good-humored family feeling than is customary at similar gatherings. Presiding over the event were Paul Levinson, President of SFWA, and Scott Edelman, until recently Editor of *Science Fiction Age*.

I am only the second British writer to receive this award, the first being Arthur C. Clarke. Initially, I felt myself to be undeserving of the honor. However, after some soul-searching, I came up with a number of exculpations for my presumption in accepting. Among my qualifications are the following: I am the only writer to have sold short stories to both Stanley Kubrick and Steven Spielberg. I have been telling stories for 65 years. (In my acceptance speech, I recounted how I had begun as an oral story-teller when a small boy at school.) For evidence of this long continuance, David Aronovitz of Rochester, MI, has just published in a limited edition a story I wrote at the age of thirteen entitled "The Rain Must Stop," complete with my original four color illustrations and a photo (David Aronovitz, 701 E. Snell Road, Rochester, MI 48306). Among my best-known novels are *Non-Stop*, *Hothouse*, *Greybeard*, *Report on Probability A*, *The Helliconia Trilogy*, and *Somewhere East of Life*. *Frankenstein Unbound* was filmed by Roger Corman. My three hundred-plus short stories have achieved wide circulation around the world, and will shortly become available through my website.