

Mary Bowden, “H. G. Wells’s Plant Plot: Horticulture and Ecological Narration in *The Time Machine*.” *Victorian Literature and Culture* 47. 3 (2019): 603-628.

In her discussion of *The Time Machine*, Bowden intervenes at the crux of two broader critical conversations – eco-criticism and narratology – and in so doing enriches both. Bowden’s main argument follows a line of inquiry emerging from environmental theorists such as Bruno Latour, Lawrence Buell, and Robert Kerns, who ask to what extent plant life serves “merely as backdrop” or rather becomes an “active subject, not . . . passive object” (605, 617). On a secondary, though equally important level, Bowden engages questions of character that implicitly recall D. A. Miller and Deidre Lynch and explicitly extend Alex Woloch’s theories. For Bowden, the novel’s plants function as Woloch’s minor characters: plants compete with humans for “ecological niches in the novel’s story and narrative attention in its discourse” (618). When I have taught the novel, students often wonder about the purpose of those botanical descriptions, and on the most basic level, Bowden offers a powerful explanation. Even better, she produces a clever and fruitful extension of Woloch’s materialist understanding of character to the ecological world, and in doing so opens up more questions, in the way good research should.

Bowden’s argument begins with an impressive historical demonstration that “the Time Traveler sets off from a society broadly preoccupied with horticultural improvement” (607). In close readings of various Victorian botanists from John Lindley to Darwin himself, Bowden explains the “progressivist” ethos within which scientists aimed to transform plants to better serve humans’ needs. But Bowden also finds, in even the most “triumphant” language, the spectre of progressivism’s limits; specifically the fear of “reversion, degeneration, and sterility found in selected and hybridized plants” (611). *The Time Machine*’s imagined future promises both the Victorian botanists’ greatest hopes and also their greatest anxieties. Wells describes Huxley’s new “garden of Eden”, where ecology perfectly serves humans’ every need; even Britain’s climate has “transformed into a tropical island” (614). But as with the scientists, imperfection rears its head, though in Wells’s case the plants ironically do not degenerate, they have grown too well. As humans devolve, “The Time Traveler witnesses this quiet vegetal takeover” (615).

Few critics touch on the novel’s non-human life, an omission Bowden suggests Wells “anticipated” when he described his “peers blinkered anthropocentrism” (617). In other words, critics focus on the degeneration of humans into Eloi and Morlock, but “neglect an essential element” of the story, namely, other species’ evolutions (617). To understand plants’ function in the text, Bowden introduces first Latour, who says “botanical constituents can be situated as actors” (617). Next, Bowden weaves in Woloch’s theory, which explains how characters compete for attention in a zero-sum discursive world, not unlike Darwin’s “struggle for existence” (618). Bowden’s clever intervention simply combines the two ideas: if plants function as actors, they are Woloch’s minor characters. Further, in this novel’s plot, the plants are slowly winning. Plants achieve a “textual takeover”, not only growing “in abandoned human buildings and atop human seats”, but also encroaching on discursive spaces, what Woloch calls the reader’s “pattern of attention” (620). Bowden offers Weena’s flowers as a key example. In the “anthropocentric point of view”, the flowers testify to humanity’s endurance and Weena’s love, but from an ecological viewpoint, they are “characters

within their own plotline” (622). As the novel’s final symbolic image, the flowers persist in both the story and also in the readers’ minds.

Besides correcting for a critical neglect of horticultural life in *The Time Machine* and explaining ecological agency with Woloch’s frame, Bowden’s essay suggests several additional lines of inquiry. First, recent critics, for example, Allen MacDuffie, have argued that Wells’s plot cannot be mapped neatly onto a degeneration narrative. MacDuffie’s insight suggests a more complex relationship than Bowden’s inverse function whereby plants rise as humans fall, for example, maybe some plants compete with others? It is also worth examining further the political implications of Woloch’s model, especially given Wells’s socialist activity: if minor characters are the “proletariat” of the novel, are plants, too? And if a novel can suggest plants’ transformation from object to subject, does Wells see ecological actors less as literal or discursive material and more as another competitor in the contest for both survival and also attention? The density and variety of these narratological, political, and author-centric questions all demonstrate the thought-provoking potential of Bowden’s claim. As *The Time Machine* becomes increasingly recognised as not just a pulp utopian ramble, but as a serious literary experiment, Bowden’s article presents a powerful tool for connecting the novel’s ecological and narrative achievements.

Max Laitman Chapnick
Boston University