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Looking Backward: 2000-1887

by

Edward Bellamy

1888



MonkeyNotes Edited by TheBestNotes.com Staff

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KEY LITERARY ELEMENTS

SETTING

The novel is set in Boston in May of 1887, and also in the year 2000. The Boston of 1887 is the present time of the novel's original audience. It is a time of industrial expansion, a time when workers are treated as replaceable parts, when poor people are blamed for their poverty, when wealthy people

CHARACTERS

Major Characters

Julian West - a thirty year-old man from the nineteenth century who finds himself one hundred years in the future. He writes a book about the backwardness of the nineteenth century so that people of the twentieth century can see how far they have progressed.

Minor Characters

Edith Bartlett - engaged to Julian West in the year 1887. She is a wealthy woman who considers labor strikes an unbearable inconvenience.

Sawyer - Julian West's African-American servant.

Doctor Pillsbury - the mesmerist who puts Julian West into a century-long trance.

Doctor Leete - the twentieth-century man who finds Julian West and resuscitates him. Later, he.....

CONFLICT

Protagonist - Julian West, a nineteenth-century man who had become complacent in the face of nineteenth-century inequalities and social injustice.

Antagonist - The nineteenth century, with its many social and economic problems and

Climax - Julian West gradually realizes the irrational economic system and the.....

Outcome - Julian West becomes an enthusiastic critic of the nineteenth century, embraces progress and becomes engaged to a twentieth-century woman. The novel ends happily, in comedy, despite.....

SHORT PLOT / CHAPTER SUMMARY (Synopsis)

The novel opens with a preface that introduces its fictional narrator-protagonist. The writer of the preface says there are many young people in the twentieth century who do not realize the enormous changes that have occurred in society, and he has therefore decided to write a "romance" as a sort of enjoyable history lesson. He will present a character from the nineteenth century named Julian West, and his representative of the twentieth century will be Doctor Leete.

The novel begins with Julian West's description of the nineteenth century as made up of four classes: rich, poor, educated, and uneducated. He describes the economic and social system as a huge coach pulled by people rather than horses. The few at the top are pulled with difficulty by the many at the bottom. Everyone worries about falling off the top or getting onto the top. Julian West is thirty years old and engaged to Edith Bartlett. They are both wealthy. Julian West has spent the day with Edith Bartlett and her family. They are upset over the labor strikes because they delay the construction of his new house, and hence, their wedding. That night in his underground chamber, he is mesmerized (hypnotized) and falls asleep. When he wakes up, he is in the twentieth century, more than 113 years in the future. He meets Doctor Leete and his family, Mrs. Leete and

Edith Leete. Doctor Leete describes the new society of the twentieth century as perfect. The mode of production of the nineteenth century has evolved and reached the height of perfection. It has been nationalized, private ownership of capital no longer exists, and everyone is an employee of the nation. Doctor Leete informs him that government's functions have been minimized with the abolition of competition and private property. Government exists to perform public service. The government is designed to help

THEMES

Major Theme - The major theme of *Looking Backward* is the application of rationality to economic and social problems. The idea that the new society is "the logical outcome of the operation of human nature under rational conditions" is repeated in different forms throughout the novel. It means that.....

Minor Theme - Part of the same statement quoted above gives one the minor theme of the novel. The idea of solidarity--people acting in concert for their mutual benefit instead of competing against.....

MOOD

The mood of the novel is that of a rational discussion, although at certain points, the author indulges in sentimentality, as he attempts to make the intellectual aspects of the.....

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Edward Bellamy was born March 26, 1850 in Chicopee Falls, Massachusetts. His grandfather and father were ministers in the Calvinist tradition. Both men eventually lost or resigned their positions, due to ideas which ran counter to the doctrine of the church. Bellamy himself later left the church because he saw it doing nothing for the present social and economic ills while spending all its energy imagining a.....

LITERARY/HISTORICAL INFORMATION

Bellamy's novel is part of a long tradition of utopias. These include Sir Thomas More's sixteenth-century *Utopia*, which coined the term. However, the concept of the creation of a perfect life on earth goes much further back in time. The often quoted Old Testament Scripture from the prophet Micah reads as follows: "And they shall beat their swords into plowshares, / And their spears into pruning hooks: / Nation shall not lift up a sword against nation, / Neither shall they learn war any more. / But they shall sit everyone under their vine and under their fig tree; / And none shall make them afraid . . ." Most utopias are pacifist. However, many.....

CHAPTER SUMMARIES WITH NOTES

PREFACE: Historical Section, Shawmut College, Boston, December 26, 2000.

Summary

The writer describes the "blessings of social order" at the end of the twentieth century. This social order is so logical and simple that it may be hard for his readers to believe that this manner of organizing society is only one century old. Just one hundred years ago, people living under the industrial system believed it to be the best way to live, destined to last and in need only of small reforms. The writer adds that in the present book, he intends to make this historical lesson pleasant for readers by casting it as a "romantic narrative." He warns the reader that she/he may find Doctor Leete's explanations trite, but that s/he should take into account the fact that Doctor Leete is describing things to someone for whom all of it is totally new. The writer adds that most writers who treat the theme of the future devote themselves to writing about expected future improvements, but it is also important to look backward at the progress the present civilization has made. Finally, the writer notes that he will step aside and let Mr. Julian West speak for himself.

Notes

The preface is a fiction that is disguised as a historical document. In it the author assumes the persona of a man who is writing in the late twentieth century, but it is helpful to remember that this text addresses more than one possible audience: a fictional audience in the year 2000 and Edward Bellamy's late nineteenth-century readers. Readers from Bellamy's own time may have assumed that industrialization was the height of civilization and needed only a few reforms to make it last forever. However, this assumption is difficult for his imagined, late twentieth-century readers to accept. They live in such a vastly improved society that they may find it difficult to believe that conditions were so much worse only one hundred years earlier.

Such an introduction would certainly startle Bellamy's readers and pique their interest about what could be superior to industrialization. It is a smart tactic on Bellamy's part. The nineteenth century gave people the idea that everything was getting better year by year and that civilization was marching forward to a brighter future. In writing as if from the point of view of the future, and looking back at the poor, deluded people of the past, Bellamy critiques this ideology of progress.

Bellamy's utopia is created as an answer to the problems of industrialization, "with all its shocking consequences," which he regards as illogical, stupidly complex, and against common sense. He will write about it as if this society were already in place and functioning smoothly for one hundred years. His representative of the industrial system will be Mr. Julian West, and his representative of the enlightened new society will be Doctor Leete.

CHAPTER I

Summary

The narrator, Julian West, announces that he was first in Boston in 1857. He realizes that his readers of the year 2000 will be shocked that he is a thirty year-old man asserting that he was alive in 1857. At that time, the civilization of the present day did not exist. Society was divided into four classes or nations, including the rich and the poor, the educated and the ignorant. He was rich and educated, so he "derived the means of (his) support from the labor of others, rendering no sort of service in return." His ancestors had lived the same way, and he expected that his descendants would, too. His grandfather had accumulated some wealth, which his family had lived on ever since. The original sum was not that large, but investments had made the money grow. This "mystery of use without consumption" will seem odd to the present readers, but it was common during Julian West's time. People had been trying to regulate interest for generations, but by the late nineteenth century, they had largely given up.

To give his readers an idea of his society, Julian West compares it to a big coach. Most of the people were harnessed to it and forced to drag it along a rough road. Some people sat on the coach and never got down, despite the struggles of those below to pull it over the rough spots in the road. The ones riding had a nice time, which they spent discussing the people below. A seat on the top was in great demand but very hard to attain, because those on top were allowed to reserve their seats for whomever they liked, usually their children. But the seats were unstable and often people would be thrown from them and have to pick up a rope and begin pulling the coach.

Julian admits that the reader will wonder how the people on top could be so unfeeling about those below, especially when their own weight added to the burden of their fellow human beings. In fact, they often expressed great sympathy for the workers below them. When things got very bad, they would call out encouragement or promise rewards in the next life, and many of them got together and contributed money to buy salves and medication for the injured. However, the main effect of seeing the sufferings of those below was to increase the value of the seats above.

While people of the twentieth century will find all this hard to believe, they must take into account the two facts that supported this state of affairs. First, people believed there was no other way to run society and second,

those on top believed they were different from and better than those who pulled the coach, and they therefore deserved their seats on top.

In 1887 Julian West is thirty and engaged to Edith Bartlett. Her family is also wealthy. They are to be married as soon as their house is built. Each class of people, whom Julian West calls nations, lives in separate areas of the city. The delay of the completion of his house is caused by labor strikes. Strikes had been common from the time of a great business crisis in 1873. Julian West knows his readers will recognize these dates as the first stages of what was to become the modern industrial system. The people of the time, however, were confused about what was happening to them. The relation between worker and owner had suddenly become problematic, and workers had the idea that they could improve their conditions. They demand higher pay, better housing, shorter hours, and the so forth. People of the wealthy class all agree that there is no way to give the workers what they want because there is not enough wealth in the world to satisfy them. They believe either that the workers will one day realize this and accept their lot in life, or that the workers will make a mess of things after gaining so much power. The latter is an extreme opinion, but one that Julian West often hears in his circle of friends. The ruling class is especially frightened by the anarchists. Julian West is no different from his frightened contemporaries, and his animosity toward the workers increases when his wedding plans are delayed.

Notes

In Chapter I the reader sees the beginning of the narrative that is promised in the prologue. Julian West is the first-person narrator. He is a nineteenth-century man who has somehow been dislocated into the twentieth century. He has clearly absorbed the values of the twentieth century and looks back on his own time with surprise at its ignorance and cruelty. He earnestly wants his readers to understand how a person of his time could come to be so indifferent to the sufferings of others. He is always very much aware that his twentieth-century readers will find his description of the class system of the nineteenth century exaggerated, since they are so far from such a system themselves.

Bellamy addresses a fictional audience, the imagined audience of the year 2000, but his narrator is a man from the nineteenth-century world. Bellamy's readers in 1888 would have been forced into the future, with a man from their own world as their guide. While this work is a critique of conditions that existed in the nineteenth century, Bellamy provides distance by setting it in the future. This technique is necessary, because if his readers assume their own social system to be the best one possible, then they will not be able maintain enough distance from it to see its faults. However, if the author gives them this distance by projecting them into a utopian society one hundred years into the future, they will be able to look at their own time with more critical eyes.

Bellamy draws an analogy between the class system of the United States and a huge coach pulled not by horses, but by people. The resulting image gives force to his implied argument that the class system is unfair. It enables him to critique several elements within the class system: inheritance, interest income, the relative stability of class status, the futility of philanthropy as a solution, and people's attitudes to the inequalities of the system.....

OVERALL ANALYSES

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Julian West - The protagonist of Bellamy's novel is virtually two people. At the opening of the novel, he is an aristocrat of late nineteenth-century Boston, and his main concern is hurrying the workers to build his new house so that he can marry his fiancée, Edith Bartlett. While in the nineteenth century, his concerns are limited to his class. Like other wealthy people, he regards labor strikes as inconveniences and poverty as an unfortunate but inevitable state of affairs to be blamed partially on the harshness of the world and partially on

the poor themselves. He is a man of leisure, who considers social and economic issues only when they interfere with his own personal plans.

When he wakes in the twentieth century, his character undergoes a gradual change. He is taught compassion for others. He is shown how to think critically and rationally from a global, rather than from a purely personal or class-based, point of view. He eventually sees his own selfish complicity in.....

Doctor Leete - Bellamy does not develop the character of Doctor Leete very fully. He is the twentieth-century rational man and a representative of the glory of compassion and communal living. He is.....

Edith Leete - Edith Leete is also a fairly flat character. Her rationality and assertiveness are mentioned as dominant traits, but her truly dominant traits are those of the nineteenth-century ideal of.....

PLOT STRUCTURE ANALYSIS

The plot of *Looking Backward* is almost nonexistent: it is a novel of ideas. Little action occurs. The hero's character evolves from that of a man who is ignorant and passively corrupt to one who is enlightened. At the end of the novel, he weeps for his "sin" of complicity within the nineteenth century's dehumanizing mode of capitalist production. The hero's path to enlightenment, therefore, gives the

THEMES - THEME ANALYSIS

In his novel, *Looking Backward*, Edward Bellamy demonstrates his intense optimism with regard to the future of humanity. His optimism is supported by two beliefs: the belief in the power of reason to improve human situations and the belief in the basic goodness of humanity. The main improvement needed in the economic system is the elimination of the waste that is caused by the private organization of labor and production in the nineteenth century. Bellamy's military model provides the system under which the necessary reforms can be worked. The moral argument of the novel relates to this theme. The novel argues for a.....

STUDY QUESTIONS - BOOK REPORT TOPICS

1. What is the extent of democracy in Bellamy's new society?
2. Is there any room for dissent or rebellion in the new society?

What is the strongest critique Bellamy launches against capitalism?.....

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