



## THE IMPORTANCE OF THE MASTERPIECES IN MODERN LITERATURE

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### ABSTRACT

*Much of The War of the Worlds is set in woking and the nearby suburbs, where HG Wells lived with his second wife, Catherine Robbins. The landing site of the first cylinder in the novel, Horsell Common, was within easy walking distance of the Wells' home.*

### Introduction

One of the features of the novel is the small geographical area – the Narrator takes his wife to Leatherhead to protect her from the Martians, then makes his way through a number of small towns including Weybridge and Shepperton. As the novel progresses, the destruction of the settings and environment is apparent with destroyed buildings, dead and dying people in the streets, black dust and red weed covering everything.

Key settings:

Horsell Common: the site of the first cylinder landing.

Leatherhead: home of the Narrator's cousin, seen as a place of safety.

Shepperton: the scene of a Martian attack.

Sheen: where the fifth cylinder lands and buries the Narrator and the Curate.

Putney Hill: where the Narrator meets the Artillery Man.

London: the Narrator's brother recounts the flight from the city.

The story is narrated in hindsight about events that occurred six years previously. The events of the novel span about a month.

The plot mostly follows in chronological order what happens between the landing of the first cylinder on Horsell Common and the Narrator's return home after the death of the Martians. Occasionally the narrative is interrupted to include scientific details learned later which are inserted throughout the book. The Narrator tells the story of his brother and his experiences when escaping from London.

What happens to the Narrator is the main focus of the story and the chapters are broken up by significant events of his life during the time of the war. The novel is split into two books: Book 1 – *The Coming of the Martians*, and Book 2 – *The Earth Under the Martians*. Each chapter has a



title, which is useful to discuss fully to analyse its significance.

The sunset of the Victorian era was a fertile period for modern myths. The Industrial Revolution had happened, technological modernity was here, yet an uncanny continuity prevailed. The fin de siècle ennui was freighted with a sense of imminent catastrophe. "It is hard to resist the conclusion," wrote the critic and Wells expert Bernard Bergonzi, "that a certain collective death-wish pervaded the national consciousness at the time." The War of the Worlds showed what it could look like: a suburban apocalypse, Ballard in tweed and brogues, a surreal Blitz of heat rays and red weed.

Wells was the first great doyen of science fiction as a distinct genre, and the most deliberate mythmaker of his times. Each of the early "scientific romances" that made his name – The Time Machine (1895), The Island of Doctor Moreau (1896), The Invisible Man (1897), The War of the Worlds (1897), The First Men in the Moon (1901) – treads mythic territory, and all of them are familiar in crude outline even to many who have not read the books. "These stories of mine," Wells wrote, "do not pretend to deal with possible things; they are exercises of the imagination in a quite different field... They belong to a class of writing which includes the story of Frankenstein." Jorge Luis Borges felt that these novels "tell a story symbolic of processes that are somehow inherent in all human destinies". Such work, he went on, "is always capable of an infinite and plastic ambiguity; it is all things to all men; it is a mirror that reflects the reader's own features and it is also a map of the world."

Born in Bromley, Kent ("a suburb of the damnedest") in 1866, Wells was the fourth child of a struggling shopkeeper, and he both hankered after and disdained bourgeois life. In 1895, he and his second wife Amy (known as Jane) were living in a rented house by the rail station in Woking, Surrey. His debut *The Time Machine* was widely praised, but reviews of *Doctor Moreau* were more mixed, and he needed a hit to restore his ascendancy.

## Methods

The War of the Worlds capitalised on a craze for all things Martian. That there might be life, even intelligent life, on the Red Planet was a conviction shared by many scientists at that time. Dark streaks were observed on the planet's surface by the Italian astronomer Giovanni Schiaparelli in 1877. He called them "channels", but when the Italian word canali was mistranslated into English as "canals", some assumed that they were artefacts built for a purpose.

Wells imagined an advanced but ailing race struggling to survive on the cooling, drying planet – and looking into space for new worlds to colonise. In the famous opening passage of *The War of the Worlds*, his nameless narrator explains that:

Across the gulf of space, minds that are to our minds as ours are to those of the beasts that perish, intellects vast and cool and unsympathetic, regarded this earth with envious eyes, and slowly and surely drew their plans against us.

The story is familiar, from the ominous cylinders crashing into Horsell Common near Woking to the tripod Martian craft



with their awful death rays, the chaos and destruction from Surrey to Primrose Hill, and the sudden demise of the Martians as they succumb to earthly bacteria. It's the classic alien invasion tale, the template for everything from *The Day of the Triffids* to *Independence Day*, Tim Burton's spoof *Mars Attacks!*, and *Attack the Block*, the 2011 film of aliens in the 'hood that introduced Star Wars's John Boyega.

## Results and Discussion

There was Orson Welles's notorious radio adaptation in 1938 that allegedly sent America into a panic, although the true extent of this is still disputed. George Pal's wobbly silver spacecraft arrived in the 1953 film; and later, Tom Cruise did the flawed-dad act in Steven Spielberg's 2005 version. The new BBC adaptation, starring Eleanor Tomlinson, Rafe Spall, Robert Carlyle and Rupert Graves, due out later this year, looks set to aim for greater "authenticity". But that is never the point of modern myths. As the critic Chris Baldick said of *Frankenstein*:

The truth of a myth... is not to be established by authorising its earliest versions, but by considering all its versions... That series of adaptations allusions, accretions, analogues, parodies and plain misreadings which follows up on Mary Shelley's novel is not just a supplementary component of the myth; it is the myth.

Like *Frankenstein*, *The War of the Worlds* comes loaded with baggage, ambivalent and ambiguous enough to support endless reinterpretation. Wells wasn't a writer of allegory, but that didn't

mean his works were devoid of it. As with most fantastical and science fiction, *The War of the Worlds* responded to its times.

In depicting the vastly superior technology of the conquering Martians, Wells was commenting on British imperialism. In one retrospective account he mentioned how he had been walking through the Surrey countryside with his brother Frank:

"Suppose some beings from another planet were to drop out of the sky suddenly," said he, "and begin laying about them here!" Perhaps we had been talking of the discovery of Tasmania by the Europeans – a very frightful disaster for the native Tasmanians! I forget. But that was the point of departure.

On that account, *The War of the Worlds* might seem to show humankind – the British in particular – getting their just deserts. But even in Wells's own time, this anti-imperialism was liable to be misunderstood. Speaking of the aptness of British rule in Uganda in 1907, Winston Churchill commented on how the British are "as remote from, and in all that constitutes fitness to direct, as superior to the Baganda [the country's majority ethnic group] as Mr Wells's Martians would have been to us." It's as if Churchill supposed Martian governance would have been a good thing.

For all its ambivalence about British militarism, *The War of the Worlds* is very much a part of the "invasion literature" genre of the fin de siècle. From the 1870s until the outbreak of the First World War, there was a widespread fear that Great Britain had let its military power decay,



leaving the isles vulnerable to invasion by its old European foes, the French and the Germans.

It was time, some said, for a thorough overhaul of the military. The scaremongering, immensely popular titles that warned of the consequences otherwise included George Tomkyns Chesney's *The Battle of Dorking* (1871), Philip Howard Colomb's *The Great War of 189-* (1892) and William Le Queux's *The Great War in England in 1897* (1894). These authors were often military men: Chesney an army general, Colomb a naval admiral. Le Queux's sequel *The Invasion of 1910* (1906) described a German invasion in which London is occupied until its liberation in a show of British pluck and grit. It was commissioned and serialised by the *Daily Mail*, to great success.

In 1920, Wells sought to distinguish his warning from such crude sabre-rattling at Germans, French and Russians. It was not the threat of war against England that people were complacent about, he said, but the very nature of war itself. Its potential for destruction had become intolerable, even apocalyptic:

A few of us were trying to point out the obvious possibilities of flying, of great guns, of poison gas, and so forth in presently making life uncomfortable if some sort of world peace was not assured, but the books we wrote were regarded as the silliest of imaginative gymnastics.

He concluded bitterly that, after the slaughter of Ypres and the Somme, "the world knows better now". In *The World Set Free* (1914) he forecast yet worse horrors,

with scientists figuring out how to unleash nuclear energy in "atomic bombs". By 1945 the catastrophic despoliation depicted in *The War of the Worlds* had become reality.

Orson Welles's 1938 broadcast came just before that storm, and tapped the anxieties of its approach. The panicked American fears of sudden attack from the sky by "aliens" seemed less hysterical after the Japanese struck Pearl Harbor in 1941. And *The War of the Worlds* seemed almost tailor-made for the Cold War, the technologically inflected paranoia of which saturates Pal's 1953 adaptation.

Gigantic spaceships looming over iconic cities – that leitmotif of the alien invasion narrative today – don't appear in *The War of the Worlds*. But it's not hard to see the genesis of this image in the towering Martian tripods, symbols of the vast technological superiority of the invaders. While the coarse jingoism of *Independence Day* (1996) is arguably more dispiriting than an alien takeover, the spaceship casting a shadow on Johannesburg in Neill Blomkamp's *District 9* (2009) neatly inverts the picture, showing that the colonialist allusion still has teeth. The insectoid aliens here are the underdogs, marooned on Earth and treated as unwelcome migrants in a sharp comment on both the geopolitics of displacement and the segregation of South Africa.

Perhaps the real alien-invasion tale for our times, however, was Kenneth Johnson's cult TV series *V* from the 1980s, in which the alien overlords look like us but are carnivorous reptiles under the skin. The series began as a high-minded attempt to



adapt Sinclair Lewis's anti-fascist novel *It Can't Happen Here* (1935). Well, it certainly won't happen here, studio executives told Johnson, unless the antagonists become aliens who eat people. How else will Americans recognise a fascist when they see one?

In offering up his story through the perspective of an "ordinary man" caught up in a devastating Armageddon that he can barely understand, Wells supplied a fruitful way to explore these anxieties of invasion, conquest and annihilation. This seems the right way to consider Spielberg's 2005 movie, *War of the Worlds*. Its context is obvious. A fan of the book since childhood, Spielberg had long dreamed of putting it on the screen – but "after 9/11 it began to make more sense to me", he said.

His rather smart and scary film is not, however, a political allegory about an assault on American freedom. Rather, it is a fable about surviving a catastrophe that dismantles all conceptions of normality, at a time when apocalyptic images of mountainous, smoking rubble piles had become real (again). Spielberg rightly discerned in *The War of the Worlds* the progenitor of a modern "end of the world" mythology, its vista of postwar ruination supplying the book's most haunting images:

When I had last seen this part of Sheen in the daylight it had been a straggling street of comfortable white and red houses,

interspersed with abundant shady trees. Now I stood on a mound of smashed brickwork, clay, and gravel, over which spread a multitude of red cactus-shaped plants, knee-high, without a solitary terrestrial growth to dispute their footing. The trees near me were dead and brown, but further a network of red threads scaled the still living stems.

According to Bergonzi, "The War of the Worlds can be read as an expression of the traditional eschatological preoccupation with the end of the world, which has been the source of so much religious imagery."

## Conclusion

As the film theorist André Bazin said in the 1950s, the alien apocalypse offers a cathartic experience, an orgy of mayhem and destruction that he dubbed the Nero complex: a technological Ragnarok in which, as Susan Sontag has written, we can experience the vicarious "fantasy of living through one's death and more, the death of cities, the destruction of humanity itself".

But not quite. This is not the Book of Revelation, because everything ends except us. We are left eking out a miserable existence among the wreckage, survivors of a diminished land in the rusty autumn after the Fall, wondering if survival was our good fortune after all.

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