Questioning H.G. Wells's Colonial Critique in *The War of the Worlds*

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Abstract: In his novel *The War of the Worlds* (1897), H.G. Wells uses a Martian invasion of Earth as a vehicle to discuss the validity of late-nineteenth-century British colonialism, drawing parallels between England's fictional plight and the real hardships of indigenous populations throughout the empire. However, though the novel questions the morality of the colonialist mission, at certain points Wells's novel reflects and even enforces Victorian colonialist attitudes.

In his novel *The War of the Worlds* (1897), H.G. Wells uses a Martian invasion of Earth as a vehicle to discuss the validity of late-nineteenth-century British colonialism, drawing parallels between England's fictional plight and the real hardships of indigenous populations throughout the empire. By casting England in the role of the conquered rather than the conqueror, Wells attempts to elicit sympathy for victims of colonization and asks his readers to consider what it would be like to live and die as an oppressed people. What is more, at both the beginning and the end of the novel, the narrator directly comments on the similarities between the Martians' and the British people's expansionist "spirit" (Wells 43). However, though *The War of the Worlds* questions the morality of the colonialist mission, at certain points Wells's novel reflects and even enforces Victorian colonialist attitudes. When Wells does refer to populations vanquished by British imperial powers, he portrays them as less advanced cultures, their subjugation inevitable; and although the vanquishing Martians are not depicted with any emotional complexity, the vanquished human characters likewise have little individuality. The narrator compares characters more than once to animals of lower intelligence, large groups of people described as floundering masses concerned only

with survival. The formal narrative style and the fact that none of the primary characters are named additionally contributes to this detached tone, promoting an "us versus them" mentality. *The War of the Worlds*, then, acts as a provoking examination of British colonialism, while remaining a product of its time unable to escape entirely the prejudiced attitudes that it critiques.

The War of the Worlds was first serialized in 1897, near the end of what historians have deemed Britain's imperial century, and one may read the novel as a reflection on both the power and the fragility of the empire at this time. Countries and territories under British rule encompassed approximately a quarter of the world, and that Wells chose to set his allegorical tale at the centre of the most expansive kingdom in history suggests that even the mightiest may fall. Indeed, Wells's concerns were not unfounded; during the latter half of the nineteenth century, conflicts in the colonies raged. Rebellions in Egypt and Sudan against British rule, the Indian Mutiny, and the Irish Home Rule movement are all examples of the turmoil that threatened jolly old England's colonial mission (Bulfin 487). Britain's dominance on the world stage concurrently faced challenges from other imperial powers, such as Germany, which had achieved a sudden and unexpected victory over France in the Franco-Prussian War in 1871. In "'To Arms!': Invasion Narratives and Late-Victorian Literature," Ailise Bulfin argues that the explosion of an "alarmist body of fiction" between 1870 and the start of WWI stemmed from anxiety that Britain "might imminently find itself facing an invasion attempt by any one of its resentful European 'great power' rivals or even by rebellious colonial subjects" (482–83). In this light, *The War of the Worlds* can be considered just one of the many invasion narratives that surfaced during this period, some other notable examples including George Tomkyns Chesney's *The Battle of Dorking* (1871) and M.P. Shiel's *The Yellow Danger* (1898). *The War of the Worlds*, however, differs from these other texts in that the invading force is not another imperial army but an extraterrestrial one.

Dispute over the validity of the colonial mission sur-

faced not only in literature such as *The War of the Worlds* but also in England's political debates. Victorian liberals voiced various reasons for opposition: some objected to the colonies for economic reasons, and some objected on moral grounds to the treatment of the conquered peoples (Howe 31). Pressure on the government to reform colonization practices additionally came from left-leaning intellectual groups such as the Labour Party Advisory Committee of Imperial Questions, whose reformist campaign for self-governance in the colonies was reportedly supported by Wells (Howe 48). Clearly, then, we can read the colonial critique in *The War of the Worlds* as intentional. The question therefore becomes not *if* Wells attempts to criticize colonialism in the novel but instead *how* he does so.

The novel questions the British imperial mission primarily by evoking the reader's sympathy for colonized people in the real world. In the first chapter of the novel, the narrator retrospectively implores that before his readers judge the Martians for their genocide, "we must remember what ruthless and utter destruction our own species has wrought … upon its own inferior races" (43). This outright admission of guilt would have reminded Victorian readers that what was fiction to them was a reality to others around the globe. Later, as he describes his journey through war-torn Southern England, the narrator claims that he felt "an emotion beyond the common range of men, yet one that the poor brutes we dominate know only too well" (160), and in the next chapter he muses that "Surely, if we have learned nothing else, this war has taught us pity—pity for those witless souls that suffer our dominion" (164). Through his hardship, the narrator gains understanding of and empathy for others who have undergone such suppression as he has, and the embedding of these realizations within the text forces the reader to pause and directly consider the current colonial injustices.

Wells also evokes readers' empathy by filling his text with realistic details. The narrator chronicles his journey with the accuracy of a geographer, noting various small towns and villages he passes, as well as specific landmarks

in London, such as Oxford Street, Euston Station, Regent's Park, Blackfriars, and Tower Bridge. He also vividly depicts the latest Victorian technologies and inventions. Wire-guns and Maxim-guns in the artillery, the bustling train stations throughout Surrey and London, the bicycle ridden by the narrator's brother and the little steamboat he escapes on—all these devices signify the contemporary world of the readers. If one disregards the Martians, *The War of the Worlds* reads as a complete and incredibly accurate depiction of Southern England at the *fin de siècle*. Readers may gasp as they see the destruction of England depicted so vividly, and Wells then reminds them that any emotions prompted by this fictional account are, in fact, real agonies for millions of people overseas. In this way, he represents the reality of colonialism on a psychological level, demanding readers' "pity" (Wells 164) by making them feel the same grief for their decimated homeland that "lesser races" might for their lands overseas.

But although Wells encourages pity for indigenous peoples under colonial rule, he does not encourage respect; rather, throughout *The War of the Worlds*, Wells enforces the idea that these colonized non-whites are less human than their British oppressors. Indeed, the reason they deserve pity is not because they are thinking, feeling beings, but precisely because they are "lesser" and therefore at the mercy of the supposedly superior Europeans. Tom Lawson asserts that this was a common viewpoint among the Victorians, specifically "that in Indigenous society they were seeing a version of themselves in the past, a glimpse of the 'drift and cave men' of Europe" (451). In other words, on an evolutionary scale, the English people believed they were more developed than those with brown or black skin. Lawson goes on to reference Wells, writing that Wells's acknowledgment of the Tasmanian Genocide in the preface to *The War of the Worlds* highlights "the iniquities or indeed the lie of British imperial progress" (454). However, Lawson also points out that while Wells criticizes this act of colonial violence, Wells also supports the theory that the Tasmanians were further back on the evolutionary timeline. When

the narrator of *The War of the Worlds* compares the Martian invasion to the Tasmanian Genocide, he states, "before we judge of them too harshly we must remember what ruthless and utter destruction our own species has wrought…. The Tasmanians, in spite of their human likeness, were entirely swept out of existence in a war of extermination waged by European immigrants" (Wells 43). Here, the author's social evolutionist viewpoint manifests itself in a seemingly insignificant dependent clause: "in spite of their human likeness." That is to say, though they looked like humans, the Tasmanians were not humans. Such disregard for other civilizations, culminating in the conclusion that its people were not even human, demonstrates an unignorable bias on the part of Wells, which readers must acknowledge before they attempt to judge the success of his novel as colonial criticism.

Wells was by no means unique in his failure to recognize colonized peoples as full humans, and *The War of the Worlds* can therefore be said to represent a widespread prejudice among the Victorians. Liberals who protested the imperial mission did so on ethical grounds, but seldom advocated political independence because they did not believe non-white populations capable of governing themselves (Howe 35). Put plainly, though some objected to colonization and the brutalities endured by the "lesser races," many of these naysayers still supported the civilizing mission and wished to impose European customs on other cultures. This attitude is succinctly expressed in the work of another writer thought to be an important influence on Wells: the evolutionist T.H. Huxley. In his 1893 essay "Evolution and Ethics," Huxley outlines what he considers the perils and benefits of colonization and discusses how European immigrants must act in order to be successful in their new home. Huxley compares colonization to gardening, saying that colonists must "clear away the native vegetation" and "introduce English grain and fruit trees; English dogs, sheep, cattle, horses; and English men" (234). Essentially, Huxley advocates for a complete eradication of local tradition, something that today would be considered cultural genocide. He goes on to

caution the English settler against yielding to the lifestyle of the local people. He warns his readers that if the colonists fail in their duty to cultivate order, "the native savage will destroy the immigrant civilized man" (235). Huxley's contrast between "native savage" and "immigrant civilized man" suggests a world of extremes: chaos and brutality, or order and culture. He implies that these "native savages" lack any culture of their own and does not for a moment entertain the possibility that their practices and ideas, though different from his, may be just as rich and complex as those of Europeans. In "The Empire of the Future: Imperialism and Modernism in H.G. Wells," Paul Cantor and Peter Hufnagel assert that "going native was one of the great fears of imperial Britain" (42), and this fear is exactly what drives both Huxley's and Wells's writing. Both depict the Englishman in a fragile fortress of order, under the constant threat of an outside force that seeks to tear them down and render the civilized individual a savage beast.

Thus, instead of humanizing non-white populations by likening their plight to that of the English in The *War of the Worlds*, Wells shows humankind reduced to animalistic chaos, suggesting that those who suffer colonization are weak and unintelligent. He even likens the English to insects in order to emphasize their helplessness against the Martian foe. When the extraterrestrials first unleash their heat-ray on a group of civilians, the narrator records how "the little group of black specks … had been swept out of existence" (59). "Black specks" conjures up an image of flies, insignificant and more a nuisance than a threat. Later, he compares the frantic retaliations of the army to a "disturbed hive of bees" (110), and both he and the artilleryman liken the Martians' superiority over humans as a man's over an ant's (167, 185). Perhaps the protagonist's most poignant comparison—one that captures his sense of helplessness against the alien antagonist—is a lament he utters after emerging from the wreckage of a ruined house:

> For that moment I touched an emotion beyond the common range of men, yet one that the poor brutes we dominate know only too well. I felt as a rabbit

> might feel returning to his burrow and suddenly confronted by the work of a dozen busy navvies digging the foundations of a house. I felt the first inkling of a thing … that oppressed me for many days, a sense of dethronement, a persuasion that I was no longer a master, but an animal among the animals, under the Martian heel. (160)

Again, in this passage, the author compares the subjugated man to an animal, as if being overwhelmed by technologically advanced weapons automatically signifies lesser intelligence. Wells calls once more for pity, imploring readers to feel sympathy for those who have suffered the same fate, not comparing humans to insects this time, but to a rabbit whose soft fur and adorable features will assuredly tweak the heartstrings of many readers. Furthermore, his use of anaphora ("I felt … I felt") builds momentum that contributes to an emotional arc in his speech. But as before, Wells's carefully crafted sympathy betrays a lack of respect for indigenous populations under imperial rule. The "poor brutes" he describes may refer both to unintelligent animals and to colonized populations—though it would appear that Wells regards those two groups as one. Notably, his choice of words ("poor brutes") is echoed in a subsequent text notorious both for its critique of colonialism and for its dehumanizing portrayal of Africans: "Exterminate all the brutes!" (83), writes a deranged Kurtz in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899). Conrad's novel is another example of how anti-colonialist attitudes can still perpetuate colonial stereotypes. Conrad's narrator attempts to illicit pity by depicting the hardships undergone by native peoples living in an imperialist colony, but ultimately he portrays those people as uncultured and undignified. In both novels, the word "brutes" connotes something without sensitivity, something unrefined and animalistic; when Wells's narrator attributes this word to the colonized British subjects, he betrays a bias against non-white people that pervades his story.

The narrative style of *The War of the Worlds* further emphasizes this bias. The protagonist is a man of science and relates these events in retrospect. Such traits render him a

formal storyteller, distanced from the events by his objectivity and his time of reflection. His prose is measured and scholarly, seldom prone to exaggeration or emotional lyricism. Because of this seemingly objective style, *The War of the Worlds* reads sometimes like a historical textbook rather than science-fiction sensationalism, and while the realistic details in the story may help to draw readers' empathy, the coldness and distance of the narrator does just the opposite. The reader has little idea of what this man has left behind. Did he have a career in Woking, or any friends and family? He seems to experience minimal grief over the fact that he has needed to flee his home. And what of his wife? There is virtually no depiction of their relationship with one another until the second-to-last chapter of the book, when they reunite in a relieved, sparsely worded embrace. The narrator does not even record her name. But then, none of the primary characters are named. The wife, the artilleryman, the curate, the brother, and even the narrator himself go unidentified. This anonymity generalizes the characters and leaves them underdeveloped and without palpable desires, passions, or distinct personalities. In this way, the human characters resemble the Martians who have come to earth en masse, indistinguishable from one another inside their metallic tripods. Wells amalgamates thousands of individuals into one simplistic mass, thus suggesting that there are only two kinds of people concerned in the conquest of land: friend and foe, us and them. Just as Martians and humans have no hope of reconciliation, Wells suggests the British and their colonized subjects likewise must remain at odds, segregated by differences as insurmountable as if the British had been an alien, albeit a superior, species themselves.

Therefore, although H.G. Wells makes several provocative observations about the flaws of colonialism, such as the inhumane disregard for the lives of those under enforced British rule, and though he attempts to elicit sympathy for colonized peoples by likening their plight to that of the English during his fictional interplanetary war, Wells cannot escape the system he critiques, and in this way his novel mirrors Victorian biases against non-white people.

Throughout the narrative, Wells compares indigenous colonized populations to animals of lower intelligence, rendered helpless by superior military power and unevolved and uncivilized compared to their oppressors. That Wells attempts to make *The War of the Worlds* a social critique and yet is unable to effectively criticize his own society from his standpoint within it should resonate with modern readers. Ultimately, *The War of the Worlds* is a product of its time, a stepping stone to a new way of thinking about colonialism, yet not devoid of the harmful attitudes that first encouraged the British to impose their own culture on others, often with devastating results.

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