

Degeneracy in Wells's *The War of the Worlds*

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### Degeneracy in Wells's *The War of the Worlds*

During the rapidly changing times of the late nineteenth century, it was common for established authors to base their work on the political and social anxieties that surrounded them. Perhaps the best example of this phenomenon can be noted in H.G. Wells, who established himself not only as a novelist, but also as a critical British social commentator, who felt it was necessary to reveal the threatening degeneracy of society and to work through his writing to enlist individuals to help prevent society's deterioration with the use of eugenics. It is to this end that Wells writes *The War of the Worlds*, in which he warns of the influence of the outsider or alien threatening an Empire that is perceived to represent civilization's height.

England, during Wells's time, with its far reaching empire, is no longer a stable institution. Many circumstances and beliefs arise to shake the foundations of British supremacy, one of which is the very science that enabled Britain's rule over subordinate countries. The instability of imperialistic England is not apparent in the feelings of the British public proper; however, with the growing strength of the scientific community, seemingly in opposition to their long held faith based culture, a general unease pervades the feelings of Victorian citizenry, which is reflected in their literature as it changes to express society's concerns and the changes which its citizens are moved to embrace. In truth, Darwin must be viewed as a primary instigator for the unease felt at the end of the nineteenth century as well as its primary success.

Part of the impetus to England's success during the nineteenth century is the advent of Darwinian thought. Wells, in *The Outline of History*, addresses the impact of Darwin's theory of evolution that results in a revolution of Victorian thought:

that the geological record . . . pointed away from the Bible assertion of a separate creation of each species straight towards a genetic relation between all forms of

life, *in which even man was included!* [author's emphasis] The importance of this last issue to the existing doctrinal system was manifest. If all the animals and man had been evolved in this ascendant manner, then there had been no first parents, no Eden, and no Fall. And if there had been no fall, then the entire historical fabric of Christianity, the story of the first sin and the reason for an atonement, upon which the current teaching based Christian emotion and morality, collapsed like a house of cards. (954)

Just as there was uncertainty with the moral foundation of the Victorians, there was uncertainty regarding the stability of civilization, for “. . . if humans could evolve, it was thought they could also devolve or degenerate, both as nations and as individuals. At what point in a downward slide did a human being cross over the line into animality?” (Spencer 204). Hence, one arrives at the true concern that prompted Wells's *The War of the Worlds*—that of degeneracy.

After studying Biology with Thomas Henry Huxley, Wells had a far better understanding of the biological processes than did the general population. However, during these early days of evolutionary theory, the general conception of the process of evolution was as a smooth, upward curve, moving toward the perfection of man. Contrary to the original view of evolution, it is now accepted that man had several dead end branchings to his evolutionary tree. The thought that there were breaks in the process or that it moved by fits and starts was unthinkable during the time as that was not a reflection of God's plan for man. Even though science was growing as a secular field, the Victorians could not conceive of it separate from God's influence. As Wells argues, “the discovery of man's descent from sub-human forms does not even remotely touch the teaching of the Kingdom of Heaven. . . . [Indeed,] men may discover that religion shines all the brighter for the loss of its doctrinal wrappings” (*Outline* 956). In short, the thought of degeneracy

held more negative connotations than just a moving backward. If evolution is part of God's plan, then it could only result in a movement to perfection. Consequently, a backward movement represented a failing of man and the loss of God's grace.

Wells warns that the threat of man's degeneracy is a result of an overemphasis on imperialism. The popular conception of Darwinism, he contends is that the violence with which colonial wars were fought supported the Darwinian idea of the 'survival of the fittest'" (Cornils 26). The disregard for the people that fall under the hammer of British imperialism, Wells asserts, leads to the weakening of the British Empire. Hence, in *The War of the Worlds*, Wells portrays the Martians as the imperialistic force that intends to subdue England:

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. And early in the twentieth century came the great disillusionment." (Wells, *War* 41)

The disillusionment, of course, is the failing of English superiority and its ability to handle any problems that might arise: "that the Martians were simply formidable human beings, who might attack and sack the town, to be certainly destroyed in the end" (Wells, *War* 88). Hence, Wells transposes Martians for the Imperialistic British and places England in the position of a pending subjugated country.

Interestingly, just one year after the publication of *The War of the Worlds*, England experiences an actual disillusionment. The "Boer War of 1899-1902" gave British forces an "unprecedented defeat by a handful of Dutch farmers" (Spencer 204). During the recruitment for this war, it was discovered that "the men from London's East-End slums . . . were alarmingly undersized, frail, and sickly" (204). As a result, the British public had "tremendous . . . anxiety at

the end of the century about the condition of the British Empire and the warnings that, like its Roman predecessor, it could fall, and for what were popularly perceived as the same reason—moral decadence leading to racial degeneration” (Spencer 204). This being the case, it seems little wonder that Wells’s novel resounded in the mind of the British public.

Due to Wells’s background in biology and because of his work with Huxley, he looked to eugenics as a solution for strengthening human genetic heredity. Consequently, charities that bettered the condition of those individuals that would naturally die off due to less desirable survival characteristics threaten to dilute man’s genetic strength. Wells believes

That there is a pressing need for . . . negative eugenics in the Atlantic communities, due to the steady elimination of death selection from human conditions . . . records an increase of one hundred per cent in the defectives of Great Britain between 1906 and 1927, while the population as a whole has increased only fourteen per cent. . . . the defective children have been better taken care of and have survived. So that they in their turn are capable of parentage. (qtd. in Partington 76)

Although the use of negative eugenics appears as a cold, clinical view of the less fortunate, Wells looked toward the creation of a Utopia. For Wells, within this Utopia inbreeding would be necessary, which necessitated elimination of any undesirable offspring to cleanse the race of undesirable recessives. To convey his concern for the taint of degeneracy through his fictions, Wells uses a metaphor of blood and disease.

Throughout *The War of the Worlds* and by the use of words that signify disease or infection, Wells argues it is impure blood that carries unseen pathogens or genes capable of rendering the total degeneration and destruction of an organism. Indeed, Wells uses this analogy

to suggest that the interracial mixing occurring in the outer reaches of the British Empire will only serve to dilute and to degrade the English bloodline, just as with mentally defective undesirables. He emphasizes this pollution of the body proper with his choice of words that reference a blood infection, such as “blight,” “blotted,” “gout,” “injection,” and “disease” (*War* 109, 127, 144, 161). Additionally, Wells refers to degeneration of the “social body” and that body’s loss of organization with the ineffective police and the deterioration of the railways, running to a “swift liquefaction” (*War* 115). Wells illustrates this dissolution as well with the lost coherence in the narrator mind’s, as he “felt the first inkling of a thing that presently grew quite clear in my mind, . . . a sense of dethronement, a persuasion that I was no longer a master, but an animal among the animals, under the Martian heel. With us it would be as with them, to lurk and watch, to run and hide; the fear and empire of man had passed away” (*War* 160). As the narrator watches the degeneration of the social body, he journeys to reach his wife and the sanctuary of home.

After the death of the curate, Wells’s narrator moves mindlessly toward his former home. Three things struggle for the possession of the narrator’s mind: “the killing of the curate, the whereabouts of the Martians, and the possible fate of [his] wife” (*War* 163). Thus, Wells’s reader understands that the religion and the social conventions of the Victorian society are threatened by the intervention of the alien threat. Therefore, as the curate rails against the Martian invasion, crying out, “Woe unto this unfaithful city! Woe! Woe! Woe! Woe! Woe! To the inhabitants of the earth by reason of the other voices of the trumpet—”, one understands that the curate is helpless to the point of madness (*War* 155). Wells uses the curate as a metaphor for the church’s inability to handle the new millennium:

The Darwinian movement took formal Christianity unawares, suddenly. Formal Christianity was confronted with a clearly demonstrable error in her theological statements. The Christian theologians were neither wise enough nor mentally nimble enough to accept the new truth, modify their formulæ, and insist upon the living and undiminished vitality of the religious reality those formulæ had hitherto sufficed to express. . . .It was the orthodox theology that the new scientific advances had compromised, but the angry theologians declared that it was religion. (Wells, *Outline* 956)

If the church were to embrace the new understanding of God's plan, Wells thought, gains could be made in establishing a world community intent on fulfilling the grand evolutionary movement to an Eden:

There can be no peace now, we realize, but a common peace in all the world; no prosperity but a general prosperity. But *there can be no common peace and prosperity without common historical ideas*. Without such ideas to hold them together in harmonious co-operation, with nothing but narrow, selfish, and conflicting nationalist traditions, races and peoples are bound to drift towards conflict and destruction. . . . Our internal policies and our economic and social ideas are profoundly vitiated at present by wrong and fantastic ideas of the origin and historical relationship of social classes. (vi)

Hence, Wells reasons that all people must move toward this Utopia. Indeed, in 1903, he joined the socialist Fabian Society in London and, in 1917, he was a member of the Research Committee for the League of Nations, at which he worked towards this goal.

In Wells's text, *The War of the Worlds*, he proposes that man can evolve to the same evolutionary height as the Martians. As Parrinder points out, "By a carefully-assembled chain of reasoning drawing on the nebular hypothesis, the law of entropy, and natural selection, *The War of the Worlds* argues that future evolution on Earth must follow the same course as the evolution of the Martians" (68). One may ask why the Martians would represent a higher level on the evolutionary path, as "Zoologically, the extraterrestrial creatures which accomplish the 'dethronement' of humanity are themselves grotesque lower animals, combining the most repellent features of reptiles, mollusks, crustaceans, insects and even fungi" (Parrinder 63). Despite their unaesthetic appearance, however, the Martians have genetic advantages over humans, notably, a direct method of reproduction:

Wells's Martians are all brain and no heart. The narrator believes that they communicate telepathically, though the content of their communications is beyond his comprehension. He witnesses how the Martians reproduce—by producing buds on their bodies, small copies of themselves—and from this he deduces that they have no genders. For Charles Gannon, this method of reproduction has complex and crucial implications in that 'Wells eliminates a basic reason for, and force in, communal relations, love, compassion, selflessness, and sensuality.' Thus, their advance mental evolution 'may entail horrific social, even physiological, alterations'. (Cornils 33)

The asexual budding provides the duplication of untainted genetic material. As there is no union of egg and sperm, there is possibility of the addition of undesirable genetic material or possibility of mutation. Hence, the Martians are of a pure blood line.



An additional genetic advantage that the Martians have over animalistic humans is that they do not have to spend time nor energy in replenishing their bodies nutritional needs. As Wells's narrator observes,

The physiological advantages of the practice of injection are undeniable, if one thinks of the tremendous waste of human time and energy occasioned by eating and the digestive process. Our bodies are half made up of glands and tubes and organs, occupied in turning heterogeneous food into blood. The digestive processes and their reaction upon the nervous system sap our strength, colour our minds. Men go happy or miserable as they have healthy or unhealthy livers, or sound gastric glands. But the Martians were lifted above all these organic fluctuations of mood and emotion. (*War* 144-5)

It seems almost contradictory that the advantages of evolution away from the animalistic nature also involves the lost of emotions. One is tempted to ask Wells as to how worthwhile a higher plane on the evolutionary scale would be when it has a lack of good feeling towards the other inhabitants. According to Wells, however, this is the plan that would lift man higher along the evolutionary path.

Ironically, in the conflict between the highly evolved Martians and the middle level Englishmen, it is the simplest terrestrial life form that conquers the Martians. The war between worlds is not fought through technology but through biology:

What becomes evident in the "Dead London" chapter is that the crucial war of the worlds was not fought on a human scale but between rival squads of bacteria. The Martians bring their bio-organisms with them, so that the River Thames becomes choked by the growth of the Red Weed. But they are also recklessly vampirish

creatures feeding off injections of human blood, with the result that they rapidly succumb to a plague since they have no immunity against terrestrial bacteria (Parrinder 71)

Through this biological war, it can be argued Wells is reasserting that the true battle for man is the fight against degeneracy. It is tainted blood that kills the Martians.

The theme of the biological and evolutionary war is one that Wells uses time and again. In *The Time Machine*, Well's Time Traveler reveals the new world order as he understands it:

So, as I see it, the upper-world man had drifted towards his feeble prettiness, and the underworld to mere mechanical industry. But that perfect state had lacked one thing even for mechanical perfection—absolute permanency. Apparently as time went on, the feeding of an underworld, however it was effected, had become disjointed. Mother Necessity, who had been staved off for a few thousand years, came back again and she began below. The underworld being in contact with machinery, which, however perfect, still needs some little thought outside of habit, had probably retained perforce rather more initiative, if less of every other human character, than the upper. And when other meat failed them, they turned to what old habit had hitherto forbidden. (101)

The Morlocks, who were the underground dwellers, had devolved into beings that were less than human, while the Eloi had kept their human form were no more than cattle in their degeneration. Thus, Wells argues, genetic heritage is dependent upon the environmental conditions under which it is tested.

Environmental conditions form the basis for Wells's fictional exploration of eugenics in *The Island of Doctor Moreau*. In *The Island of Doctor Moreau*,

Edward Prendick is shipwrecked on a Pacific island on which Dr. Monreau . . . is conducting experiments in vivisection, aimed at turning animals into human beings. The animals, grotesquely mutilated, learn through fear to copy human speech and behavior, but the system breaks down; first Moreau and then the drunken Montgomery are killed, until Prendick is left alone with the Beast People as they relapse into animal savagery. The film of evolution is run backwards.

(Aldiss 26)

Stover argues that the conflict between “nature and nurture” is “actually a cover for . . . birth control, or better, is a ploy to give it decisive significance. In short, it is an argument to kill and clear in the name of the Cosmos and universal Humanity” (225). Again, one is confronted with Wells’s concern for degeneracy.

Wells’s argument throughout *The War of the Worlds* and his other texts, such as *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, and *The Time Machine*, centers on his concern for the purity and health of man’s genetic blood lines and his fear of degeneracy. For Wells, the possible devolution of men is evidenced in the brutality of the imperialistic movement, the foreigners descending upon England with claims of citizenship, and by the statistics that show the undesirability of the lower class in Britain. Therefore, it should be clear that Wells uses his texts, whether fiction or essays, to illustrate to the Victorian public that evolution is not a one way street but rather it is a road that can go in either direction—to evolutionary heights and utopia or spiraling down to devolvement and degeneracy.

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