

What is the effect of
the juxtaposition of
the ordinary and the
extra-ordinary in...



Wells combines hyper-realism with his own extremely active imagination in *War of the Worlds* to create an ambiance from start to finish, where the extra-ordinary and the ordinary are inexplicably combined to make phrases, paragraphs and chapters that builds up to the point where we are no longer even sure what is normal or abnormal. Because of the very nature of the book we expect the extra-ordinary but I think we do not expect so many ordinary elements to make an appearance, especially in such quantity and in such close juxtaposition with the extra-ordinary.

By combining elements such as the arrival of the Martians with thoughts of what cake to have with afternoon tea, Wells manages to create an effect of confusion within the reader. It causes us to alienate ourselves from the characters because we do not understand their complete and utter ignorance of the extra-ordinary. Our taste of the extra-ordinary comes in the second chapter of the first book titled 'The Falling Star'. Wells describes the falling projectile as 'an ordinary falling star' in the first chapter, briefly tricking us into thinking that this mysterious flying object is nothing more than a harmless lump of rock.

But instead of leaving us to be fooled, Wells, through the narrator, goes on to give a vivid and circumstantial account of the falling star which is obviously far from customary. In the first paragraph of that chapter, the narrator gives us an account of how the star was 'rushing', indicating purpose, over Winchester. If we are to believe that it is just a falling star then it would not make sense for it to have a sense of purpose in its movement. This leads us to think that it is actually something more and that the humans portrayed in the book are rather ignorant if they think that it isn't.

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This sets us up to be slightly apprehensive because we don't know what the thing is or what it will do in the future. But in the second paragraph he starts by describing how he was enjoying an afternoon writing in his study. This juxtaposition throws us off a little because we were expecting a large reaction to the falling star since it is blatantly not of the norm. Alternatively, the general public do not seem to react highly to the star at all. Even the narrator himself seems more preoccupied with other trivial human activities than he is by the impending invasion.

He says, ' For my own part, I was much occupied in learning to ride the bicycle' which seems so trivial to our generation but for them the bicycle was the height of technology. Wells creates a sense of irony here: our most advanced machinery is the bicycle and yet the Martians are already sending missiles across the gulf of space. When next anything out of the ordinary happens we are told that the Thing has now crashed landed on Horsell Common. Of course now the people are interested in it because it has landed in their back garden. The narrator tells us the story of Ogilvy, the friend that discovered the Thing.

He is originally very interested by the Thing but it soon becomes old news. In fact the narrator tells us that he even left the common to have ' breakfast at Henderson's'. This is a huge juxtaposition; there is the Thing buried in the common but there is still time for food. Again, Wells highlights the trivial lives of mankind and its ignorance. He wanted to draw attention to the complacency of the British when put into context with the war and Germany. The Thing is like Germany; its there, we know it could pose a threat, but we

are not too concerned because we are complacent and ignorant enough to believe that we are untouchable.

In fact, all the public seemed to have treated the Thing as a tourist attraction. Instead of being the terrifying thing that it becomes, the common folk are utterly oblivious and the whole day is being treated as a nice family trip out to see the mysterious object on the common as we can tell through Wells' use of 'the sweet seller'; someone who would normally only be present at a local social gathering such as a fair or market. But within chapter 3 Wells and the narrator provides us with quite a stark juxtaposition of the ordinary and extraordinary.

On one hand we have the ordinary; 'the crowd', 'the sweet seller' and 'the boys playing tag'. All are very normal actions and people. But when juxtaposed with the extraordinary, an odd reaction is provoked. Wells puts these images into a background of 'blackened land' with 'vertical streamers of smoke' which is quite a vivid likening to hell. Wells creates a very barren land, devoid of life as if he is foreshadowing the events to come and makes us the reader wonder if the Thing is all it seems to be and what will happen to the people.

As the story progresses we learn of the Heat-Ray and how the Martians have us completely under their command. The next few chapters we only really experience the extra-ordinary for instance 'the Martians emerging from the cylinder' and perhaps it is the juxtaposition between these chapters of death and destruction and the decidedly uneventful and unthreatening chapters

that start the book that make the destruction of mankind even more shocking.

After all it is not everyday that aliens come from Mars and start massacring people. However the pathetic fallacy in chapter 5 does provoke a reaction where juxtaposition is not used as frequently: The sunset faded to twilight... The dusk came on a slow, intermittent movement upon the sand pits... began, a movement that seemed to gather force as the stillness of the evening about the cylinder remained unbroken. " The sky here reflects what is happening, the sunset turning into darkness symbolises the world coming to an end and the end of the era of mankind. It is indicative of the horrors to come and makes us think that the ordinary is far behind us. Also within that extract is juxtaposition between 'gather force' and 'the stillness'.

Wells seems to be trying to confuse the reader as to the true intentions of the Martians in their cylinder by being very contrasting in his use of words. For example 'gather[ing] force' would suggest that the Martians are building up in strength and will soon burst out onto the world like a volcano and yet 'the stillness' suggests a lack of movement which makes us wonder whether the Martians are actually doing anything in their cylinder. This effect, which confuses us to the Martians true intentions, then, makes the shock of the hostile Martian take-over even more profound.

But Wells has not finished confusing us. The contemporary reader automatically assumes that everyone would have heard about the Martians and be terrified by them because in our modern society, news travels fast.

But in chapter 7 'How I Reached Home' the narrator, who by now was

terrified and 'so haggard', encounters some 'common' folk to whom he asks for news from the common. The reply to this question is an inarticulate and surprise 'Eh?' from one of the men. 'Ain't yer just been there' one the men asks in complete disbelief and surprise of the narrator.

For us the reader it is very frustrating and confusing that these people do not understand and have absolutely no clue of the danger that is on their doorstep. We are also surprised; we did not expect Wells to continue with this juxtaposition of the ordinary and extraordinary because the plot is now so riddled in the extraordinary that we think the ordinary is the think of the past.

This surprise continues the next chapter as well. Instead of the extraordinary becoming more prolific, the narrator tells us that everybody is getting on with their lives: All over the district people were dining and supping, working-men were gardening after labours of the day, children were being put to bed, young people were wandering through the streets love-making, students sat over their books. 'The narrator gives us this description of the lives of people around him. All the activities described are incredibly normal and uninteresting. What makes it more ironic is that these innocent activities are juxtaposed with the villas burning and the second cylinder 'fall[ing] from heaven'.

Also, all the human activities described in the above extract are ones commonly associated with rest, relaxation and a state of calm. This calmness is interrupted by the fact the Martians 'All night long... were hammering and stirring, sleepless, indefatigable'. By placing these two things side by side,

Wells makes it very clear how separate the humans are to the Martians and makes us seem primitive and uncivilised. It seems ironic that the aliens- who the humans in the book once thought were unintelligent and uncivilised -are working hard whilst the humans sleep.

Wells, through the narrator, suggests to the reader the inherent complacency of mankind. This could make a sense of self-disgust at our ignorance and our unwillingness to except new ideas and concepts. By now the extraordinary and the ordinary are so inexplicably mixed that we cannot really be sure which is which. The contemporary reader, who by now must be so desperate for the characters to understand the danger they are in, would be exasperated and also confused again by how the narrator continues throughout chapter nine to juxtapose things like conversations with his milkman and neighbour about the Martians.

They discuss how the ' Martians had been surrounded by troops'. Is this not an unusual conversation to be having whilst exchanging your milk for money? This is repeated when the narrator has a similar conversation with his neighbour, who hands him strawberries whilst simultaneously stating his ' opinion that the troops would be able to capture or to destroy the Martians during the day'. Again Wells is drawing attention to Britain's complacency regarding Germany; we knew they were a very real threat yet we did nothing about them.

By using this method, the narrator manages to thoroughly confuse the reader as well as make them become detached from the entire situation. The effect of the juxtaposition suggests to us that in fact the extraordinary is now

ordinary and therefore not as exciting or terrifying as it should be. So, in retrospect, this surprises us even more when Wells suddenly makes the plot even more terrifying. When we next read of the ordinary juxtaposed with the extraordinary it is the second book and after all the destruction of the first book.

Wells does not really need to include the ordinary whilst telling of how the Martians completely decimated our planet because the shock of it is already enough. He does not need the added shock factor and confusion because the description of the take over is shocking and confusing in itself without any literary techniques to enhance the feeling. He builds us up to think that the extraordinary is no longer substantial and that we should not fear it but then completely blows the reader out of the water with 'pillars of fire' and 'the stir of battle' that accompanies the reign of terror the Martians now hold over the humans.

These are frightening imageries that he is using, so while we have been lead to believe that nothing more terrible than what has happened will happen, Wells still tries to shock and frighten the reader with war imagery. By using this war imagery, Wells may also have been suggesting what would happen if and when Germany attacked Britain; a point that he must have hoped people would pick up on and be afraid of. In chapter 8 of the second book, 'Dead London' we once again are introduced to Wells' method of juxtaposition of the extraordinary and the ordinary.

The narrator describes the night as 'the mother of fear and mystery', juxtaposing the fear with the loving imagery of the mother. He also describes

the ' dusky houses' and then juxtaposes these houses, which seems ordinary, with ' red weed clambered over... the ruins'. The ruins here are a very stark contrast to the untouched houses they are juxtaposed with and therefore makes the impact more shocking. Also the descriptions of the red weed that ' clambered over... the ruins' is highly unusual in itself.

Not only does Wells make it sound like the red weed is alive by using personification, he uses the red colour of blood to describe how the weed looks; to make the weed seem more sinister, as if it is sucking the blood out of London. Then, in what really is the ending of the Martians hold of terror over the land, the narrator describes the ' passing of something', the something here being an unknown, possibly extraordinary object that we should be afraid of, which he then juxtaposes with a ' stillness that could be felt', an ordinary, calm feeling.

This sentence with that juxtaposition maximises the relief the reader feels for the narrator, indeed for mankind, should any of it be left because of the way the ' stillness' makes the ' passing' seem much more profound, like we are lucky to see the back of it because in its wake we are awarded with a ' stillness' which could also be seen as a word associated with healing. I think that Wells' objective throughout the book was to build up the terrible things that the Martians did.

I think that he wanted to make the reader so confused with mankind's complacency that, when something really extraordinary and terrifying happening, the shock would be maximised. This effect is achieved through his skilful placing of things like ' breakfast at Henderson's' with the terrifying

'heat-ray' together to make an ambience of confusion and detachment from the situation.

He really wanted to draw attention to our complacency, which when put in context with the current affairs of the time, would have drawn attention to our complacency in regards to the threat of Germany. Its not merely a book, it is a social commentary of how we as human beings think we are so untouchable in our little worlds that when something huge does happen, be it a World War or a Martian invasion, we are completely unprepared and therefore almost deserve to be wiped out for our own arrogance in our abilities.

If this effect had not have been used, I think that the readers would not have felt such a shock at the terrible things written within this book and that the juxtaposition of the extraordinary and the ordinary draws in the reader, so that they are captivated from start to finish through Wells determination to create inner turmoil and his eagerness to prove our complacency as a race.