

The war of the worlds: a critique of imperialism



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

With the close of the 19th century and the dawn of the 20th, much of the world was changing. In particular, world literature was shifting from the ideals of Romanticism to the stark realism of novels written after the Great War. At the beginning of this shift lies the novel *The War of the Worlds* by H. G. Wells. It is a unique work in that it can be considered an example of both literary themes present during the 1890s, Romanticism and realism. In the words of Wells himself, it is a “ scientific romance” combining aspects of both. While it uses the Martian invasion of Earth as an extended metaphor to critique imperialism in fine Romantic form, its approach is very realistic through its use of verisimilitude, telling of the fictional invasion as an actual event that occurred in the recent past. It is the use of this literary technique that lets *The War of the Worlds* stand out amidst novels with similar themes but rather more conventional premises, such as Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* . Considering the subject matter, the opinions and knowledge of the general public at the time, and the prevailing literary ideas, it was crucial to establish credibility early on. Otherwise, the novel would have been easily dismissed as either too fanciful or too confusing, and its emotional impact would have been greatly reduced. In the novel, Wells provides a base for the use of verisimilitude by writing in the first-person, in the past tense, and from the point of view of a participant writing his memoirs about an event in the near past, all of which contribute to giving the audience a sense of looking back on something that has already occurred. This is crucial, as the audience can better relate to a highly improbable yet historical event, rather than a similar event which only might occur in the future. Wells supports this base through a description of the Martian investigation of man and introduces a comparison to imperialism by immediately laying out that “ as men busied

<https://assignbuster.com/the-war-of-the-worlds-a-critique-of-imperialism/>

themselves about their various concerns they were scrutinised and studied [like how] a man with a microscope might scrutinize the transient creatures... in a drop of water” and that men were furthermore “ serene in their assurance of their empire over matter” (3). Incidentally, the use of verisimilitude in *The War of the Worlds* has the side effect of making the novel more direct (since it is ideally coming across as the narrator’s memoirs) and thus more palatable to the average reader. Rather than needing an extended introduction which could range for chapters and potentially discourage the audience, the novel can instead introduce the most pertinent details necessary to create the background plot and make the transition to the main plot in only a few pages. It is an unorthodox beginning, but it does wonders for convincing the audience that the novel has intellectual merit beyond the basic story and is not just another foolish fantasy to be discarded. As the plot progresses into the narrator’s account of what actually happened, Wells continues to build on the base established in the opening pages to incorporate verisimilitude further into the novel. First, he uses accurate scientific facts to describe Mars and the Martian journey to Earth. He reminds the audience of the vast stellar distances involved (140, 000, 000 miles), which at the time was hardly common knowledge. For the average reader, this evokes a sense of awe at the abilities of the Martians to traverse such a distance. Then, he leads into a discussion of why the Martians wished to come to Earth in the first place in order to clear up much of the ambiguity as to why such dissimilar creatures (as the reader later learns) would want to go to the trouble of doing so. At this point, the theme of critiquing imperialism comes out strongly, as the narrator addresses the audience directly: “ And before we judge them too harshly we must

remember what... destruction our own species has wrought, not only upon animals,... but upon its inferior races,” referring to the Tasmanians that were wiped out by British settlers (5). By comparing the Martians to British imperialists, Wells shows the readers how they, through the British Empire, have mistreated much of the developing world. As for the reader, seeing the similarity between seemingly inhuman monsters and themselves is startling. Wells also draws on his own reality to provide proper names for the people and places in the novel. The narrator states that the Martian preparations were spotted by several real-life astronomers like Perrotin of Nice, Lavelle of Java, and Oglivy, a famous British observer. He even spends the night with Oglivy at his Ottershaw observatory, where they observe the first cylinder’s launch. However, regardless of what this could mean to them, the populace remains unconcerned, as evidenced by Punch satirizing the “volcanoes upon Mars” for the political cartoon (8-9). Wells then places the landing site of the first cylinder as Horsell Common, which was an open area near his home and the home of the novel’s narrator. Wells could have easily placed the setting in a foreign or fictional country, but placing it in Great Britain makes it all the more pressing; reading about somewhere far away being devastated is one thing, but reading about your own town and surrounding towns being devastated is quite another. A common method of distancing oneself from a traumatic event that has occurred to others is to assert that it won’t happen here. Placing the novel in Great Britain prevents the audience from resorting to that method and forces them to confront their fears and apprehensions, both about the fictional Martians and the real effects on the world of British imperialism. Again, most of Wells’s efforts to make *The War of the Worlds* read like a factual real-life account have to come at the beginning to

establish credibility, but that does not mean he can forget the rest of the novel. Throughout the rest of the story, Wells uses several contrasts in the British people's reactions to the Martian invasion to further support the theme. For example, the narrator describes how, after the Heat Ray was first used, he encounters a group of people who have only heard about it, but not actually seen its deadly effects. One asks, "People seem fair silly about the common. What's it all about?" and when given an answer replies that she has heard "Quite enough, thanks" (33). The group scorns the narrator as exaggerating the crisis, which incidentally was the reaction of most people when confronted by the effects of imperialism. They dismissed it as something they didn't need to worry about, as they have only heard about it, rather than seen it directly. However, when the Martians finally emerge in their iconic tripods, the people change their minds without even a small demonstration of the Heat Ray, as shown by the response at Shepperton and Weybridge shortly thereafter. A similar response is described by the narrator's brother in London, as the "people in their best clothes seemed scarcely affected by the strange intelligence [of the Martians]" until the Martians arrive, whereupon "the whole population of the great six-million city [poured] en masse northward" (87, 91). Some are even driven to insanity, like the curate that the narrator meets. Shaken by the destruction of Weybridge, the curate slowly goes mad during his time with the narrator, and, once trapped in the destroyed house by the Martian pit, succumbs quickly. He becomes so insensible that he eventually claims, "I must bear my witness!" and rushes to the Martians (156). Fortunately, the narrator escapes by knocking out the curate and hiding in the house's scullery. These examples work to convey to the reader what it feels like to be the victims of

<https://assignbuster.com/the-war-of-the-worlds-a-critique-of-imperialism/>

a more powerful entity, which is also how the inhabitants of several British colonies feel, albeit to a lesser degree. While the novel eventually does resolve on the high note of the Martians' demise, the audience cannot forget how their collective actions towards colonial peoples can be reflected in the fictional Martian actions towards the audience and must confront themselves over what has happened, both in the novel and in reality. Essentially, *The War of the Worlds* uses verisimilitude in order to combine a thrilling story and an exposition upon the moral dangers of imperialism. Wells could very easily have written two novels that each do half of what the *The War of the Worlds* does, but the overall emotional effect on the story and the reader would be compromised. A thrilling yet superficial story would excite the reader but accomplish nothing substantial, while an exposé on imperialism would accomplish something substantial, but would be so dull as to end up in a library somewhere, a sort of "call to arms" that no one would hear. When combined, the story may not be as thrilling and the exposé may not be as exposing, but people will read it, and the world will be that much richer for it.