

Depictions of danger in frankenstein and the war of the worlds



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Both *The War of the Worlds* by H. G. Wells and *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley are novels that introduce dangers in the form of an 'enemy' - the details of which enemy are largely unknown by the reader. Wells and Shelley, though dealing with enemies in different forms (one a single monster, another a squadron, one man-made and the other beyond man's comprehension), both present the threat of this enemy in regards to tension and suspense. Whilst reading about this 'enemy', the reader is made to feel anxious by use of ominous retrospect in the narrative and the gradual reveal of the monster at hand. Both monsters are introduced slowly and seemingly unthreateningly, but these details combined with the ominous foreshadowing in the narrative develops the idea that there is a threat at hand. The reader is offered little or gradual information about the enemy and as a result, both writers create tension surrounding what is unknown - making the reader feel the threat of danger in a visceral way, as though the reality of each narrative was their own.

Both authors use ominous foreshadowing to indicate to the reader that there is a constant threat - but a threat that the reader knows little about just yet. Use of retrospect is integral to the narratives, in making the reader conscious that worse is to come from each event they are introduced to. For Shelley, use of prolepsis is integral to communicating the constant threat that the monster poses in his story. When we first meet Victor, he is described as "dreadfully emaciated by fatigue and suffering" - seeming that he is not only physically distraught but has also endured extreme emotional strain. Readers subsequently wonder what the reason behind this "fatigue" could be, as Victor begins to warn Walton that his destruction is the result of

scientific endeavor. He comments on how Walton seeks “ for knowledge and wisdom” as he “ once did” and proceeds to ask that the captain listen to his own story in the hopes that he will learn from his mistakes. The use of the adverb “ once” not only informs us of his previous (i. e. no longer) pursuit for knowledge but implies a kind of remorse. It suggests that Victor “ once” sought out wisdom and endeavored to be a great scientist, but his experience with such scientific development has lead him to consider it a thing of his past. Shelley’s use of prolepsis here links his previous scientific activity to his present broken state. Another example is when he returned to his home shortly after the ‘ birth’ of the creature, expressing that he “ did not conceive [at that time]” what “ anguish” he was “ destined to endure” as a result of creating the monster. For Frankenstein’s readers, Victor’s employment of galvanism and current scientific theories would be recognizable to them, and spark curiosity about where science might advance us as a society. Yet hearing him speak with finality about his pursuit for “ knowledge and wisdom” (he “ once” sought it) sheds a negative light onto what scientific endeavor could actually cause. We are reminded consistently, through this use of prolepsis, that his contribution to science did not lead to success and grandeur but to him becoming this “ man on the brink of destruction”. Victor is himself, then, evidence that for the threat of danger in his life, his story – the constant threat of the monster and the death that he brings.

In *The War of the Worlds*, retrospect is contrasted with the narrator’s feelings during the early stages of the invasion. Evidence of the narrator’s confidence during these stages is seen when he reassures his wife that “ the Martians

were tied to the pit by sheer heaviness, and at the utmost could but crawl a little out of it". The adjectives present illuminate how empathically confident the narrator was with this false knowledge – that the enemy was held by "sheer heaviness" and could only move "a little". The phrase "at the utmost", too, is a kind of colloquialism that is overly reassuring – demonstrating the level of confidence the narrator had in feeling they were safe. Retrospect changes his confidence into foreboding. When hearing about the army's advances on the Martians, he expressed that "It hardly seemed a fair fight to me at that time". By adding "at that time" to the end of this expression is an immediate juxtaposition of his opinion after the events, against his complacent confidence then (representative of most Victorians during the peak of the British Empire) and his sympathy towards the Martians. Ironically, the fight is nowhere close to being a "fair" one in the end – in subtly adding "at that time" to his comment the narrator alludes to the threat of destruction which looms in the future. Not only this, but the reader is curious and anxious about why the situation may be less than a "fair fight". Particularly since this was published at a time where people were easily unnerved by the potential realities literature presented (consider how people reacted when *The Battle of Dorking* was published, and the necessity that the government reassured the public), Wells' elusive review of the invasion from the future would undoubtedly have left his readers uneasy. As a result, both narratives create tension by subtle moments of ominous retrospect that indicate a constant sense of threat in the future, from which both narrators are reflecting on the events. Use of contemporary fears or curiosity in scientific development or the possibility of

invasion are woven into both novels and enhance the sense of threat already created by prolepsis and foreshadowing.

In a similar way, both Shelley and Wells draw out the reveal of each 'enemy' in so gradual a way that creates suspense - such a suspense that leaves the reader feeling threatened but with sparse information about what the threat actually is. This gradual introduction of the enemy is most poignant in *The War of the Worlds*, when the Martians are slowly and painfully revealed to the narrator. Not only do the cylinders arrive one by one over the course of several weeks, but the first description of a Martian is drawn out and embroidered with visceral adverbs. He describes it as "A big greyish rounded bulk, the size, perhaps, of a bear" that was "rising slowly and painfully". Not only do the adverbs "slowly" and "painfully" draw out the movement of the Martian in such a way that generates suspense, but the narrator also demonstrates uncertainty when trying to describe it - "the size, perhaps, of a bear". The word "perhaps" indicates a guess - he can only guess at what size this Martian is, due to how "slowly" it is being revealed. There is little information gathered about the Martian, leaving the reader curious to understand the specifics of what is being observed. Later the narrator describes how the Martian regarded him "steadfastly" and "heaved and pulsated convulsively". Again, these adverbs sound painful and suggest that the Martian is struggling. For which reason, the narrator felt it was "hardly" a "fair fight" when he first met them - an inference which is later proved completely wrong. Given that the novel was first published as a serial in a newspaper, tension was key to communicating this sense of threat - and so Wells could achieve this by drip-feeding information about the

enemy, a being whose appearance was almost incomprehensible to a contemporary audience.

In contrast, the revelation of the monster in Frankenstein is not so slow and gradual but rather evidencing he is harmless and weak. Victor describes how one of the monster's hands "stretched out" and that he made "inarticulate sounds". The verb "stretched" implies reaching, not able to access what he is trying to get to (in this case, his father). Describing his attempts at speaking as "inarticulate sounds" demonstrates his incapability to communicate - he does not know anything about language yet, being so new into the world. Though Victor talks about him in a gruesome manner, commenting that when the monster reaches out it is "seemingly to detain [him]", the monster does not seem to be an actual, aggressive threat at this point - but merely ugly, stumbling into life like the Martian struggled out of their cylinder. This weakness found in the monster's early moments communicates Shelley's beliefs in the innate good of children/humans before their experience of society, yet from Victor's biased and disgusted, retrospective narrative the reader similarly comes to expect evil of this creature. Hence, the descriptions provided by Wells and Shelley in their narratives - though different in the way that they introduce the monsters - develop tension about how each monster will divulge and grow to become the 'enemy' the retrospective narrator believes them to be.

The keys to both Shelley's and Wells' presentation of the threat of danger, then, seem to be tension and suspense. The anticipation surrounding the monsters' next movements, particularly evident in *The War of the Worlds* as a serial publication, is necessary to draw upon contemporary fears and <https://assignbuster.com/depictions-of-danger-in-frankenstein-and-the-war-of-the-worlds/>

beliefs of science or invasion theory which serve to embellish the sense of threat the two writers develop. If there weren't tension, suspense and unanswered questions in the narrative when describing the monsters in primary stages or moments of ominous retrospect, the reader would not be free to interpret the text with their own contemporary knowledge (and latent fears). Hence, the two writers present the threat of danger by developing tension, which fuels the building curiosity and unease in the reader.