

How Reliable is the Narrator in The War of the Worlds? (emagplus 77)

How far can we trust the narrator of Wells's novel? Does Wells deliberately make us question his presentation of the events, to suggest that they can't always be taken at face value? Dr Diana Hallam considers these questions, by examining some significant moments in the novel.

Like H.G. Wells himself, the narrator of *The War of the Worlds* is 'a professed and recognised writer on philosophical themes' with an active interest in science. Again, like Wells, he is living in the Maybury district of Woking, is married but childless, and is 'much occupied in learning to ride the bicycle'. He has personal contacts in the worlds of science and journalism and makes informed reference to leading Victorian scientists and their theories. However, despite these Wellsian characteristics the narrator is not Wells. The narrator refers to Wells dismissively as 'a certain speculative writer of quasi-scientific literary reputé' whose articles on the Martians 'long before the Martian invasion' adopted a 'foolish, facetious tone'. This elaborate literary joke in which an author mocks his own output through a fictional narrator suggests a certain ironic detachment between Wells and his creation from the outset. So what are we to make of this unnamed character and his report of the Martian invasion of earth? Close reading of the novel suggests that he is, at best, an ambivalent figure and that, as an eye-witness of the invasion, he is inescapably damaged and compromised by the events he records.

Early Impressions

At first, the narration impresses the reader with its sense of objectivity. The narrator writes with the benefit of hindsight: 'the storm burst upon us six years ago.' His account is substantiated with scientific references, precise time indications, topographic exactitude and close observations of people and landscapes. Events also serve to make the narrator an eyewitness of Martian activity, specifically the first Martian landing and the fifth cylinder's handling machines. His descriptions of the Martians' physiology in Book II Chapter 2 is given to correct 'hasty study' contained in some 'pamphlets.' The philosophical reflections framing his narrative also suggest a detached and educated viewpoint.

However, it is worth noting the ironic circularity of the narrator's tale. In the first chapter he describes himself as 'busy upon a series of papers discussing the probable developments of moral ideas'. There is cartoonish humour here in the fact that the narrator is so bent on his speculative writing that he misses the future landing in his own backyard. In the penultimate chapter, the narrator stumbles into his deserted house and follows his own 'muddy footsteps' to his study where he finds, still lying on his desk, 'a paper on the probable development of Moral Ideas with the development of the civilising process.' The problem is that the narrator's record of humanity's brutal instincts for self-preservation in the face of the invasion seem to have undermined his own framing of reality as a steady march towards moral development.

From the start, a certain boy's-own-adventure spirit characterises the narrator's approach and suggests that he has been caught up in the excitement of events. As soon as the Martians arrive he is overcome by 'schoolboy dreams of battle and heroism.' His 'war-fever' leads to an overheated desire to 'be in at the death' of the Martians and informs his misjudgement in returning to Maybury as soon as he has committed his wife to the care of relatives. Furthermore, although the narrator eventually dismisses the Artilleryman and his alarming eugenic fantasies as a 'strange undisciplined dreamer of great things', the fact that he countenanced these 'great things' at all is, to modern sensibilities at least, a concern and, in the light of the rest of the narrative, leads us to wonder whether it is not the narrator himself who is the 'undisciplined dreamer.'

The Second Narrator

In Chapter 14, the narrative shifts to a second narrator, the first narrator's younger 'medical student' brother, who may provide a yardstick against which to measure our first narrator. Wells ostensibly uses the second narrator to compensate for the restricted viewpoint of the first (soon to be trapped under the fifth cylinder in a collapsed house in Sheen) and to provide a credible account of the mass exodus from London. However, the gallant second narrator, who rescues Mrs Elphinstone and her companion at some risk to himself, acts as a foil to the egocentricity of the first narrator whose lack of compassion escalates, troublingly, throughout the novel.

Two Troubling Incidents

Two incidents suggest that the novel's principle narrator loses his moral compass in the face of the invasion. Having abandoned his wife, in spite of her fearful 'white face', the first narrator exploits the landlord of 'The Spotted Dog', renting his dogcart on the vaguest pretext. Failing to mention the Martians, he admits that, in leaving home, 'it did not seem nearly so urgent that the landlord should leave his.' The narrator's sin of omission is brought home to him when, returning to Maybury, he stumbles on something 'soft' – a reminder of the landlord being a soft target for his social assurance. Discovering that this soft thing is a corpse, he turns it and recognises the landlord. Continuing, morally, to pass by on the other side, the narrator, tellingly, 'stepped over him.' Most problematic, however, is the narrator's murder of the curate. The structuring of the narrator's account seems to encode the guilt he feels for this act. He documents meeting the curate in Chapter 13 of Book One and then begins a four-chapter divagation on his brother's escape from London before returning to the curate. Book Two begins with an admission that he has 'wandered so much from (his) own adventures' and with a promise to 'resume'; this adds to the sense that something has been hidden under the narration, suppressed by the switch of focus, 'lurking in an empty house' and about to come shockingly to light. Despite the narrator's hyperbolic hostility towards the 'timorous, anaemic, hateful' curate, the clergyman does not seem to deserve his fate. Before the murder, the narrator is knocked unconscious by falling masonry and admits:

I was insensible for a long time, the curate told me, and when I came to we were in darkness again, and he, with a face wet, as I found afterwards with blood from a cut forehead, was dabbing water over me.

Here the curate's neglect of his own wound and his patient tending of the unconscious narrator suggests an entirely different personality from the one so vigorously ascribed to him by the narrator. Although the narrator is quick to diagnose the drunkenly voluble curate as 'insane', it is, in fact, the narrator who has received a sharp blow to the head and whose judgement may, consequently, be

impaired. It is not the curate's 'selfish despair,' but the narrator's, which precipitates the tragedy. 'Fierce with fear,' the narrator seizes the meat-chopper and strikes the curate. Moreover, the narrator seems unconscious of the obvious irony that turning the blade and killing him with the butt represents 'one last touch of humanity'.

A Disturbed Mind

There are clues throughout the narrative that the narrator may not be of entirely sound mind. He hints at his pathology in Chapter 7:

perhaps I am a man of exceptional moods. [...] At times I suffer from the strangest sense of detachment from myself and the world about me.

This sense of alienation would be consistent with several personality or mood disorders. The narrator's account of his mental state leading up to the killing of the curate also suggests an unbalanced mind: 'those who have been under the shadow, who have gone down at last to elemental things, will have a wider charity,' he declares. Might this 'shadow' pass as a metaphor for clinical depression, bipolarity or some other form of mood disturbance? Objective evidence of the narrator's stressed state is provided by the artilleryman, who notes: 'it's not sixteen days together – and your hair is grey'. That the narrator is experiencing severe post-traumatic stress and is capable of self-harm is further borne out by the reaction of the 'kindly people' who find him 'a demented man' now 'wandering, weeping and raving, through the streets of St John's Wood' and who take him in and 'protected (him) from (himself)'.

In conclusion, despite early indications of a rather magisterial objectivity, by the end of the novel Wells has created a nagging sense that the narrator has unravelled both emotionally and mentally. Misjudgements, callousness, murderous rage and lapses into insanity undermine him and greatly increase the sense of horror in the novel. The narrator demonstrates in his own person the frightening degeneration of humanity when reduced to a struggle for survival; his own deterioration becomes a powerful commentary on the horrors that he witnesses. Insanity, a favoured Gothic trope, has now infected the narrator and brought the horrors of Martian invasion even closer to the reader, forced to experience events through the damaged consciousness of a deeply compromised, unnamed 'everyman'.

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