

Through the Prism of Science: Exploring the Fictional World of H. G. Wells

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ABSTRACT

The closing phase of the Victorian age, especially the nineties, witnessed radical changes in its massive literary output. As a reflection of collective taste and stable order of reality, the novel was slowly getting marginalized by other genres that would have far-reaching repercussions even in the early twentieth century. This was the period dominated by G. B. Shaw and the Fabians, H. G. Wells, Henry James, Thomas Hardy, Oscar Wilde, Thompson, Kipling, Henley, the early Yeats, Housman and Davidson. Due to several socio-political and economic factors, the unquestioned authoritarianism of the Victorian age was coming to an end, though the sunlight years of the Edwardian era would continue to exude warmth for some more time for the British public. Among these writers, Wells, with his scientific humanism, and Shaw, with his Socialist philosophy, represent new attitudes to society by incorporating radical ideas in their writings.

Keywords: *Victorian age, radical ideas, science fiction, scientific humanism, dystopia.*

The closing phase of the Victorian age, especially the nineties, witnessed radical changes in its massive literary output. As a reflection of collective taste and stable order of reality, the novel was slowly getting marginalized by other genres that would have far-reaching repercussions even on the early twentieth century. This was the period dominated by G. B. Shaw and the Fabians, H. G. Wells, Henry James, Thomas Hardy, Oscar Wilde, Thompson, Kipling, Henley, the early Yeats, Housman, and Davidson. Due to several socio-political and economic factors, the unquestioned authoritarianism of the Victorian age was coming to an end, though the sunlight years of the Edwardian era would continue to exude warmth for some more time for the British public. Among these writers, Wells, with his scientific humanism, and Shaw, with his Socialist philosophy, represent new attitudes to society by incorporating radical ideas into their writings.

In this paper, I will attempt to analyze the significant concerns and radical ideas of H. G. Wells as he portrayed them in his fiction. Since it is not possible even to touch upon all his novels and shorter fiction, so voluminous was his output, I have selected one major science fiction novel *The First Men on the Moon* and two well-known short stories *The Moth* and *The Stolen Bacillus* by H. G. Wells and will present them here in the light of his interpretation of theories of evolution and the future of mankind. During his lifetime Wells achieved unprecedented

public fame. Being a novelist certainly helped build up this reputation, but the nature of the fame did not spring solely from his novels. It was his status as a journalist and as a pedantic scholar with his infallible comments on any subject under the sun with complete confidence which ensured his position as a cult figure. Along with Shaw, who enjoyed a similar kind of reputation as journalist, Wells had remarkable sway over the Press, and the two were acknowledged as the most highly paid writers in Britain. However, this fact should not detract from Wells' merit as novelist. With fifty novels his output can be considered as prodigious. My focus will be on his science fiction work and my purpose will be to see whether they still continue to be relevant for our times. Avoiding an exclusive accent on aesthetics, Wells sought to promote the novel as essentially a medium of ideas carefully wrapped up with fantasy and the necessary strokes of realism. Even when Henry James sought to convert him to the creed of aesthetics, Wells remained unconvinced. Thus, exploring whether his novels gain their vitality solely from his ideas or from undercurrents of aesthetics secretly nourishing his writings would be meaningful.

The writings of Wells can be divided into three broad phases in the following roughly chronological sequence. Most of his scientific romances were written by 1900; during the first decade of the twentieth century, there is a gradual shift from science fiction to social comedy, and then onwards, he focused on the novel of ideas. The science fiction novels and short stories of Wells can be further divided into two categories: space novels/stories and earth novels/stories since Wells depicted the earth as a colony in the intergalactic arena.

The novel *The First Men on the Moon* (1901) is a stunning tour de force. With the knowledge prevalent then Wells fantasizes, along somewhat logical lines about men reaching the moon. Since Wells' novel was published a year before the achievement of the Wright brothers, it could be that Wells had heard about their experiments in aero designing. It was a little later (1902) that Wright Wilbur and Wright Orville flew three biplane gliders to test flight, control so essential to successful powered flight. Orville Wright successfully flew their first powered airplane for 12 seconds and Wilbur Wright for 59 seconds on 17th December 1903. Thus, Wells could not have visualized airplanes, leave alone rockets as such, with such a paucity of information about flights. However, J.R. Hammond points out that Wells imagined the entire process of manning a flight to the moon without drawing from any source.

What is so remarkable for a story written in 1900 – before even flying machines had been invented – is the uncannily accurate anticipation of the methodology of space flight, including

lift-off, weightlessness, zero gravity, radio communication with earth, re-entry and splashdown. 2

The fundamental issue of reaching the moon is not addressed at all since he did not wish to strain too much, right at the beginning of the narration, the readers' willing suspension of disbelief. His scientist Cavor, the protagonist of the novel, invents a substance called 'cavorite' which is resistant to all forms of interactive energy, including the force of gravity. Surprisingly, the narrator of this novel, Bedford, is also not a scientist. He speculates about the possible substance sent to Cavor from London in sealed stone jars and impresses upon the reader that it was helium—for what else could be so gaseous and thin?

Even if we overlook the scientific credentials of Cavor we realize that his character is not fleshed out and we see him somewhat through a haze. The cricket cap on Cavor's head is an almost permanent fixture and going by the norms of Victorian and Edwardian society, this headgear, if worn outside the cricket grounds, almost invariably roused the viewer to a laugh. Through the character of Bedford, an entrepreneur, Wells satirizes the businessman since this was the age of imperialism which valorized the colonizer. However, it is not the characters, per se, who claimed all the attention of Wells; rather, he is engrossed in his contemplation of man's scientific endeavours pushing the frontiers of knowledge. Probably inspired by an account of desert climate, Wells describes the surface of the moon, its extreme cold at night and its fierce heat by day. We do not know whether Wells consulted scientific journals to have some approximate idea about the moon, but he describes vividly the plants that grow and wilt within a day due to the inclement weather. However, Cavor and Bedford are mesmerized by the way the plants grow:

How can I describe the thing I saw? It is so petty a thing to state, and yet it seemed so wonderful, so pregnant with emotion. I have said that amidst the stick-like litter were those rounded bodies, these little oval bodies that might have passed off as very small pebbles. And now first one and then another had stirred, had rolled over and cracked, and down the crack of each of them showed a minute line of yellowish green, thrusting outward to meet the hot encouragement of the newly-risen sun. For a moment that was all, and then there stirred, and burst a third! 'It is seed', said Cavor. And then I heard him whisper very softly, 'Life!' 'Life!' And immediately it poured upon us that our vast journey had not been made in vain, that we had come to no arid waste of minerals, but to a world that lived and moved! We watched intensely."¹

The reference to the sun and the burgeoning of life seems to be a re-creation of the Adamic experience. Their search for a new utopia seems to have borne fruit and the two are lost in a state of veneration. This passage becomes more significant because one of the basic purposes

of space exploration nowadays is to find the semblance of earthly life on other planets. Today we have, through the medium of animation technology, the visual treat of actually watching the rapid growth, blossoming of plants and their final wilting away. To imagine this process when even photography, leave alone animation, was at its nascent stage, is the mark of a genius and this is why his novels still draw us towards them.

We are also moved deeply by his creation of the Selenites, the exotic ant-like creatures who move about on the moon's surface. The Selenites herded together in a strict social hierarchy that determines their role in the community, remind one of a dystopia run along with the principles of totalitarianism. The novel seems to have some parallels with Swift's Gulliver's Travels but never rises to its level of profound satire. It remains a thrilling tale of the moon being accessible to us though not habitable.

As we turn our attention to the short story 'The Moth' we see it harbouring many of the issues that Wells was intensely preoccupied with. Though he saw science as an inevitable outcome of man's pursuit of knowledge, Wells did ponder over the role of science and its ultimate effect on the future of humankind. The scientist Hapley, in 'The Moth' reflects an extremely suggestive image of a man caught in the fin de siècle crisis and attempting to assume a godlike role of infallibility. Hapley is at loggerheads with another biologist called Pawkins, whom he treats as his arch-rival. Inwardly Hapley resents this position of wavering equilibrium and wants to supersede him. Should a scientist seek to appropriate the higher realms of scientific learning out of pure self-centered motives? Wells attempts to illustrate how the very principles of a scientific temper are trampled upon by Hapley to secure the position of numero uno in the professional sphere of scientists. Pawkins –plain-looking, phlegmatic and slow to retort-- loses out significantly before the rapier thrusts of Hapley's wit. Wells, through this situation, satirizes the incapacity or the unwillingness of modern man to look beyond appearances and finds his judgment on something substantial.

Hapley, driven by an excessive desire for fame, considers the mild-mannered Pawkins not only a great hindrance on his path but also an unsuitable figure in the realms of science. What should be his modus operandi for this? To Hapley, scientific research becomes a pretext for overpowering and overthrowing his rival.

Soon the rivalry degenerated into acute acrimony when Pawkins published a paper on the subject of Death's-head Moth. Hapley, an expert on the subject of moths, challenged the

original research content and mounted a vicious attack upon Pawkins and his scientific conclusion. Strangely enough, the scientific fraternity, instead of intervening and restoring some form of sanity in their interpersonal relationships, waited for Pawkins' self-defense quite calmly. Is science to be the handmaiden of the human ego and depend on it for its survival? This seems to be the silent question asked by the author.

Unable to share his predicament and unsure about his own scientific achievement, Pawkins recoils upon himself. After this, what follows in the narrative is protracted negation and greyness. Hapley's aggressiveness and Pawkins' own failing health, symptomatic of his inner malaise, gradually lead to his death. Wells, in his application of the fantasy of anti-Utopia, depicts the emergence of something sinister in Hapley that tries to replicate Pawkins as an image which can be demolished gradually.

The conflict of passions now locates itself in Hapley's mind. He, chafing at the untimely death of his archrival Pawkins especially when his undisputed victory was to be declared, suffers a breakdown. Pawkins was the foil that reflected his greatness; therefore, Hapley is visibly reduced without him. In a gentle way, Wells seems to be asking the question, 'where is it all leading?' The reader doesn't expect hatred to become a prompter for scientific research, but Wells probably wanted to explore the relationship between deep passions and cerebral exertion. Hapley does not seem to be positioned in a familiar cultural environment. His highly-evolved consciousness, his aware mind, in these passages, seems to inhabit a cultural world or an environment devoid of values, cultural or moral. In this context, a 'culture' is essentially the familiar and reassuring psycho-social environment he has grown up in and which he can retain wilfully. We can also take into account the publication of Freud's seminal works, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899) and *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905), around the turn of the century and the deep and pervasive influence that Freud had on Wells. The story of Hapley getting unhinged is as much concerned with the post-cultural process as with a melancholic prophecy.

The countryside, to which he retires in order to recuperate from his psychological shock, does not turn out to be the paradise that will restore his primal innocence. One night, he sees a moth he had never seen before. He is thrilled to no end since it is a new genus and it resembles Pawkins. For a while, he pursues it since the moth's presence excites him and he decides that the moth, as subject matter for his research, will vindicate his position as a great scientist.

However, the next instance as he recalls the death of Pawkins his heart sinks for without a rival no triumph gains complete value.

Suppose fantasy is the unintended crystallization of a subjective experience nourished by an order of reality (which in turn is created by collective impressions). In that case, it acts /relates directly to the susceptibility of a sensitive mind. Initially, the reader treats the moth as real then as the narrative progresses, it is recognized as a figment of Hapley's imagination. Circumstances force Hapley to accept that the moth is only a hallucination but as it flutters about tantalizingly around him he cannot help chasing it. This is where Wells scores over many other writers. He succeeds in showing a basic human frailty: to believe in one's illusions with growing rigidity when the distinction between reality and hallucination gets blurred. The moth could also be a projection of Hapley's guilt of precipitating the sudden demise of Pawkins. The strategic appearance and disappearance of the moth is also significant as it reminds us of the scientist's theoretical pursuit of one vast generalized truth that remains elusive. The chase itself becomes a metaphor for the goals he cannot reach, i.e., prove indubitably that he is superior to Pawkins and the foremost scientist in his field.

However, this crisis of his disturbs the well-being of a few individuals who fail to understand him and Hapley also fails to clarify his position to them. The grey-haired landlady, suspecting him of lewd behaviour, shuts herself up in her rooms upstairs with a servant maid who acts as a cautious chaperone. The vicar, whom he visits, tries to detect the causes that are causing such abnormality of behaviour in him. Thus, Hapley, who experiences different orders of reality with and without the moth, waits hopelessly for their convergence at some point. He begins to doubt the truth of his being. Changes in this pattern of an elusive pursuit cease to be systematic and the more he assesses the courses he is taking the more they get diversified. For example, the moth first disturbs him indoors at night, then draws him out in the garden and this madness to possess it spills over to the daytime and the village area.

This culminates in Hapley's falling into a chalk-pit-- symbolic of his final fall from an orderly secular perception of truth to irremediable chaos. The shifting to the hospital shows the intermediary stage where he struggles to retain the last residues of his sanity. The insensitivity of the medical doctor ensures Hapley's entry into that region where nothing is intelligible any more. Wells probably satirizes the efforts of scientists to probe deeper into Nature and the cosmos without adopting a holistic perspective. If truth is to be grasped, it should be done without de-contextualizing it.

The same motifs of the pursuit and the obsession for power re-appear in the story “The Stolen Bacillus”. The bacteriologist proudly displays a slide containing the cholera bacteria to a Visitor in his laboratory. To us, who are so familiar with chemical/biological warfare, the visitor's questions carry special significance. However, so deeply engrossed in his scientific experiments to protect society from disease and pestilence, the scientist does not recognize the threat. This capability can create an illusion of sanity and innocence that Wells is so good at.

As the bacteriologist elaborates upon the power of death contained in a sealed tube the morbid pleasure of the visitor becomes evident. Contrasted with this morbidity is the unruffled and straightforward pleasure of the scientist who gets carried away by his own rhetoric. The interruption by his wife and his momentary withdrawal from his laboratory form the pivotal point of this narrative. The bacillus is purloined and it is the alertness of his wife that confirms it. She represents the kind of equilibrium he has to gain in the face of life’s myriad mysteries. Even his rushing out without hat, coat and shoes is suggestive of his denuded self.

The pattern of the bacteriologist chasing the Visitor or the self-styled anarchist, a product of extreme social alienation and the wife following close upon her husband’s heels (a procession of three different horse carriages) seems to be paradigmatic of various levels of sanity and insanity. For the husband, the wife’s solid common sense is meaningful only so far as it serves the cause of science. To her, the importance of science consists in retaining her husband’s attention and affection. The bacillus thief treats science as a potent weapon for wreaking personal vengeance on society. Witnessing this mad chase, a group of cabmen have a hearty laugh in Cockney dialect. It is as though science has practically no significance for that stratum of culture. This comic relief contrasts nicely with the demented quest for the bacillus tube as though it were an intergalactic marvel.

Tormented by his megalomania, the Visitor vows to annihilate vast sections of the London population only to penalize those who had ignored him. Wells seems to echo his fury thus, “Death, death, death! They had always treated him as a man of no importance... He would teach them yet what it is to isolate a man.” 3

Fortunately, the brittle tube cracks and crashes down on the floor. He shudders as he sees that his plans have backfired and the scientist can catch up with him and arrange for his arrest. This accident forces the visitor to do a volte-face and turn into a masochist from a sadist. He drinks

the few drops of the lethal substance to prepare for his end. Wells suggests a thin line dividing these two aspects of manic behavior.

Instead of pathos or melodrama generated by the second meeting of the Visitor and the bacteriologist, there is subtle devising of mystery. The scientist beams good-humouredly at the thief, notices his wife, accepts her ministrations and then accepts to be led away by her.

In a fit of absent-mindedness, what he had shown to the Visitor was a tube containing a new species of bacterium—that caused blue patches upon various monkeys—and called it inadvertently the Asiatic cholera. The household pets who were administered this had also turned blue. The anti-climax reveals a touch of sardonic humour and points out how dangerous science can be in the hands of people without the proper knowledge and temperament.

It may be argued that one novel and two short stories are insufficient material for illustrating the greatness of the achievement of Wells but these three texts, selected judiciously and read closely, contain some of the suggestive themes (biological mutation, anti-utopia, visionary politics, scientific and technological innovation, new discoveries in nature) of H.G. Wells. These texts embody a unique generic combination that can prove attractive to ‘literary’ and scientifically minded readers. Moreover, Wells successfully structured his story around an idea or an object. Tom Shippey corroborates this idea in the following lines:

Thus, there is no absolute need (in the science fiction story at least) for a hero, heroine or a central figure. There is none in the Wells story where the central interest, as the title indicates, is on a thing...on an object, a technique or on the implications of an object or a technique.”³

Wells accepted that his significant works belong to hypothetical scientific fantasy. I have tried to highlight how Wells has delved into the human mind and carefully charted the attitudes towards science. Suppose man can explore the mysteries of life and the universe with the help of science. In that case, he can also turn this knowledge against himself. He should lose control of the levers that give him access to science at no point.

Endnotes:

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- 2.Hammond, J.R. *An H.G. Wells Companion*, the Macmillan Press Ltd., London and Basingstoke, 1979, p. 98.

3.H. G. Wells. Tales of Life and Adventure, Collins, London and Glasgow, 1954, p. 21.

4.Shippey, Tom (Ed.). The Oxford book of Science Fiction Stories, OUP, Oxford, 1992, p. X (Introduction).

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