This sample essay earned an A in a FWIS class. The assignment resembles closely the criteria under which your Essay #3 will be evaluated. —ALM

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FWIS 198: Astronomical Ambitions

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Wells and the Bourgeoisie: Science Fiction as a Social Critique

Science fiction, at its beginnings, was used as a way to warn humanity away from the dangers of technology and the future. HG Wells, one of the most well-known writers in the genre, choose to create a warning for humanity while foregoing any futuristic technology. This essay argues that H.G. Wells' short story "The Star," by taking the reader from a description of civilization to a description of its destruction, criticizes his bourgeois audience's prosperous but inert culture of productivity and exposes the disruptive effects that industrial capitalism and imperialism have on rationality, humanity, and other themes at the heart of science fiction.

Wells' emphasis on psychology and public perception are part of a wider critique of the inattention his audience pays to both scientific consensus and disruptions to industry. Commentary on seemingly ordinary facets of Wells' contemporary society is a common theme throughout his works; according to Darko Suvin, he intends his stories to be "the valid realization of some disregarded possibility...as to comment on the false securities and fatuous satisfaction of everyday life." In the case of "The Star," the "disregarded possibility" is the sudden chaos caused by a cosmic catastrophe, and the "false securities" are manifested in the fictional public's lack of panic. Wells clarifies that the reader "must not imagine...that the whole world was already in a terror," referring to an earlier description of how churches could be heard ringing their bells in a desperate panic. The public in the short story "would not further a foolish panic;" not only did "the workers [continue to gather] in the factories," the "soldiers [continue

to] drill," and other normal happenings go on, they tried to actively discourage panic. The newspapers "roared through the night" to "insist on the lesson of the year 1000; for then, too, people had anticipated the end." It is first important to note that this passage was not necessary to advance the plot; the coming catastrophe was inevitable. By including this passage, Wells emphasizes what he perceives as the "false security" of an industrial society that is hyperfocused on productivity and monetary value. At the end of the day, "nine human beings out of ten were still busy at their common occupations." Most of humanity will remain apathetic until it is too late to prepare. Wells also briefly describes "the shops" that remain open and the "workers [still] gathered in factories" to reinforce the connection between economy and his audience's sense of safety. Workers keep working and shops stay open because years of industrialization and economic development led to the "prosperous bourgeois England" and the "tranquility of the Victorian environment" that Suvin declares is the backdrop of every story belonging to Wells' "first and most significant [science fiction] cycle" (208). The unwillingness of the public to break their comfort is further emphasized by the aforementioned active discouragement by the newspapers; the very idea of an existential threat, or anything that would dramatically alter their way of living, was sacrilege.

Wells goes on to critique the Eurocentrism that resulted from imperialism in the context of the traditional scientific theme of human fragility. "The Star" functions as a repeat of the lessons taught to European intellectuals by the earlier scientific romances of Kepler and Shakespeare. During the cultural upheaval that was partially instigated by heliocentrism and the challenge it presented to Catholic doctrine, scientific romances encapsulated the senselessness felt around Europe as people learned that their world was not the center of creation. As Scott Maisano put it, the clergy "feared that belief in stellar influences jeopardized the doctrine of free

will and compromised 'the integrity of the soul'" (428). Thanks to works such as Shakespeare's *Cymbeline,* an attempt to "put the unmediated word of God in the hands of all believers," western society slowly grew comfortable with their peripheral position in the cosmos (Maisano 407). Wells' contemporaries, however, had forgotten this lesson. Once imperialism succeeded in wrapping its tendrils around the globe, Europeans were able to comfortably redefine themselves in a position of dominance in an ironic return to the pre-Copernican hubris that kept them in the dark ages. Suvin took note of Wells' commentary on this trend, noting how his writings detail "the gradual, hesitant coming to grips with an alien superindividual force that menaces life...by behaving exactly as the bourgeois progress did in world history," and even quoting Wells' himself: "Are we such apostles of mercy as to complain if the Martians warred in the same spirit?" (208). This is what Suvin referred to as the Wellsian Inversion; the writer is attempting to put the benefits and prosperity his audience obtained through industrial exploitation and colonialism into perspective by creating a world in which his readers are the ones at danger. "The Star" does a particularly good job of portraying the white man's fragility; the coming disaster does not discriminate between classes, races, cultures, or continents. Wells goes into detail to describe every single location that the Star's effects are felt; "in Virginia, and Brazil, and down the St. Lawrence valley, it shone intermittently through a driving reek of thunder-clouds," while "In Manitoba was a thaw and devastating floods" that was matched by the storms seen "along the coast of Argentina and up the South Atlantic." Wells continues this way, vividly describing the catastrophe that takes place around the entire world as the Star draws closer. In doing so, Wells is telling his audience that their industrial economy and exported exploitation does not place them any higher in the hierarchy of the Heavens; all are equal, and all are at the mercy of the expansive void that lies beyond our atmospheric shores. This is solidified by the

end of the short story, when Martian astronomers talk of the "little damage" that was done to Earth, "which only shows how small the vastest of human catastrophes may seem at a distance of a few million miles."

When contextualized among other works of science-fiction that similarly rely on the catastrophic, "The Star" is revealed to be an attempt at warning the audience that their mode of existence is easily disrupted; in doing so, it bears a resemblance to the dystopias that would later come to dominate science fiction. Wells conveys the fragility of his contemporary environment through his detailed description of the destruction that was seen on Earth. The storms caused by the Star "drove the waters in many cases scores of miles inland, drowning whole cities," while the Pacific tidal waves "poured over island and island and swept them clear of men," and a "wall of water...swept inland across the plains of China." Wells goes on to describe the destruction that could be seen in various parts of the world, until "the European watchers" noticed that the Star had passed. In the aftermath, "such few ships as had escaped the storms of that time came stunned and shattered" back in to their ports. While there were far more details of destruction, it is worth noting that Wells begins his description of the destruction with oceans and began his description of the aftermath with ships. The writer is attempting to get his British audience to notice that, in this short story, Brittania no longer ruled the waves. The oceans were thrown into chaos, disrupting the lifeline of the aforementioned imperial-based prosperity. The Star had immediately ruined the fabric of European society; the importing of goods that they had become familiar with and the comfort provided to them by industrialization had vanished overnight. To add insult to injury, Wells even including a character, the Mathematician, who attempted to warn them of the coming destruction. Because of their comfort and the low value they place on science, however, that warning went unheeded. The destruction they faced, and the criticisms

that Wells attached to it, mirrors similar criticisms later made by dystopian literature in science fiction. Murphie describes dystopias in which “the machine has become God, while individuals have become depersonalized, given numbers instead of names,” and featured inventions like “pulsating tubes running through buildings are 'the intestines of the social system', carrying food, air conditioning, information, waste - and people” (106). At the heart of the forthcoming sci-fi dystopias was a fear of the technology and innovation that was thrown into warp speed by the same industrial revolution that created the society Wells was attempting to criticize. Wells was a sort of grandfather to what these writers attempted to accomplish; the only difference was that Wells focused on the effects of those innovations on his social environment, rather than just the technology itself. Wells’ societal warning also used the Heavens to accomplish what the dystopianists used technology to do in reference to the scientific romances mentioned in the previous paragraph.

HG Wells’ “The Star” functions as a critique of everything that Wells was unable to criticize without the help of fiction. It closely examined the fabric of industrial society, the benefits his contemporaries received from imperial exploits, and attempted to show his audience their errors in much the same way that far earlier writer had done. By doing so, he created a near-timeless work that will undoubtedly hold value for centuries after its writing.

Works cited

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