

The War of the Worlds



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF H. G. WELLS

Wells was born into a working class British family, the youngest of four children. His education was erratic—though he read passionately and broadly, his father sustained an injury that forced Wells to work in various apprenticeships to support the family. Although these apprenticeships got in the way of his schooling, they were deeply influential to his lifelong belief in the injustice of unequal distribution of wealth. Wells eventually apprenticed under a chemist and earned a spot at a university where he studied biology with Thomas Henry Huxley. Huxley was a passionate proponent of Darwin’s theory of natural selection—a theory that figures prominently in *The War of the Worlds*. Wells’s university years fostered his passion for socialism, devotion to science, and interest in writing. By the end of his time at university, he was beginning to see writing as his main occupation as he wrote biology textbooks and short stories, one of which (“The Chronic Argonauts”) went on to become *The Time Machine*, one of his most famous novels. In his science fiction writing, Wells defined what are now established conventions of the genre (including alien invasion and mechanical time travel). He also composed acclaimed realist novels, nonfiction works about science and history, and political tracts. Wells was nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature four times, and is widely known as one of the “fathers of science fiction.”

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

When Wells was a university student, he studied biology with Thomas Henry Huxley, a great proponent of the theories of Charles Darwin. Thus, Wells was exposed to Darwin’s idea of natural selection earlier than most, and *The War of the Worlds* is a testament to the theory’s influence on his thinking. Although Darwin’s magnum opus, *On the Origin of Species*, was published in 1859, his theory of evolution and natural selection wasn’t yet widely accepted when *The War of the Worlds* was published almost 40 years later. As such, the fact that the Martians in Wells’s novel die because they haven’t gone through natural selection on earth is quite significant, since it is a clear endorsement of Darwin’s theory. Indeed, Wells treats the idea of natural selection as a simple fact, thereby allowing the theory itself to ease its way into the discourse not only of the scientific community, but of the general public, as well.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The War of the Worlds forged a new direction for a genre known

as Invasion Literature. This style of writing focused on military conquest, especially regarding the sudden invasion of a city or country by foreign enemies. George Tompkins Chesney’s short story “The Battle of Dorking” (1871) is generally thought to have established the genre, which remained popular until the First World War. Chesney’s story outlines the invasion of Britain by an unnamed, German-speaking military force. Seeming to have tapped into an acute national fear of invasion, the story was an instant success. Wells pushed the fear of invasion to the extreme by writing about alien invaders, playing off of and highlighting his readers’ xenophobia and discomfort with the unknown. This imaginative exploration of real-world political issues through fantastical scenarios can also be seen in Wells’s 1895 novel *The Time Machine*, which addresses the issue of class stratification and examines the impact of the industrial revolution on society by imagining a distant future in which society’s rich and poor have evolved into distinct species.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The War of the Worlds
- **When Written:** 1897
- **Where Written:** England
- **When Published:** First serialized in *Pearson’s Magazine* in 1897, and later published as a book in 1898.
- **Literary Period:** Victorian Literature
- **Genre:** Science Fiction, Invasion Literature
- **Setting:** Victorian England
- **Climax:** Because *The War of the Worlds* was originally published in installments (and because Wells later added chapters), each installment can be said to have its own narrative arc and climax. However, the most obvious climax is when the narrator narrowly escapes a Martian’s notice by hiding under a pile of coal.
- **Antagonist:** The Martians
- **Point of View:** First-person narration

EXTRA CREDIT

Radio Broadcast. In 1938, a radio adaptation of *The War of the Worlds* aired in America. The actor Orson Welles narrated the story as though it were a newscast—and was so convincing that many listeners thought the events he described were actually happening. Widespread panic and hysteria abounded that night, sparking heated controversy in the coming days about the station’s decision to run such a program.

Innovation. Inspired by *The War of the Worlds* and the Martians’

flying machines, Robert H. Goddard had an idea that eventually led to the invention of the liquid-fueled rocket. This invention paved the way for the Apollo 11 Moon landing in 1969.



PLOT SUMMARY

During the astronomical opposition of 1894, when Mars is closest to earth, a number of observatories spot a flash of light emanating from the red planet's surface. Night after night, the planet seems to ignite for a moment. The narrator himself witnesses this through a telescope owned by his friend, an astronomer named Ogilvy. Although both men are excited, Ogilvy assures the narrator that it's quite unlikely there are living beings on Mars. The local newspapers, for their part, are slow to report on the anomaly, and when they do, they don't ascribe much significance to it.

In the small hours of morning after many consecutive nights of the strange Martian flashes, a greenish flame sweeps across the sky and crashes into a sandpit near Ogilvy's house in Horsell, England. Thinking he's seen a meteor, he rushes outside to find the object. When he arrives, he finds a large cylindrical mass embedded deep in a crater caused by its own impact. As he watches, the end of the projectile begins to unscrew, and he sees what he thinks are men, half burnt to death, trying to escape from inside. Scrambling out of the pit, Ogilvy runs toward Woking, where he meets a wagoner who ignores him because he looks and sounds insane. Finally, Ogilvy finds Henderson, a journalist from London who quickly follows him back to the pit before sending a telegraph to London.

Slowly but surely, the cylinder from Mars attracts large crowds, which stand around the edge of the pit waiting for something to happen. It seems the cylinder is about to open when the heavy lid finally falls to the ground, causing the panicking crowd to go quiet. From the dark cavity emerges a dark, greyish creature, about the size of a bear, with "luminous discs" for eyes and snake-like tentacles. Just as this creature emerges into the pit, a new one appears in the opening of the cylinder, at which point the narrator sprints toward the trees for cover. Looking back, he sees the head of a man who had fallen into the pit try to escape before suddenly falling backward with a scream.

While the narrator slinks through the woods—too afraid to go near the pit—a group of men (including Ogilvy and Henderson) approach the cylinder with a white flag. As they near the Martians, a blinding light jumps forth and incinerates them. The crowd breaks into terror as the Martians start wreaking fiery havoc on Horsell Common, burning people and trees and everything in the vicinity. The narrator goes home, where he finds his wife and tells her everything he's seen. He and his wife sit down to dinner and eat a calm meal while he assures her that the aliens won't harm them because the force of gravity on earth is too strong to allow Martians to roam freely across its surface. This seems to quell both his and her nerves, despite

the fact that the narrator obtained this information from Ogilvy, who has just been killed by Martians.

The next day, with the memory of the Martians fresh in their minds, the narrator's fellow Englishmen surprisingly go about their everyday duties. Some people talk about the disaster excitedly, as if discussing entertaining current events. Meanwhile, a group of soldiers approaches Horsell Common and establishes a perimeter around the pit. Late that night, another cylinder falls from the sky, landing not far from the first. The next day, fighting breaks out between the humans and the Martians, and it quickly becomes clear that human weapons are no match for the Martians' Heat-Ray. The narrator and his wife decide to escape to the house of some relatives in Leatherhead, a short trip from their home in Woking. The narrator goes to a nearby inn and borrows a horse and a cart, which he uses to transport his wife to Leatherhead before turning back to Woking to give back the horse, having promised the innkeeper to have it back by midnight. By the time he makes it back to Woking, however, a third cylinder has arrived, and he looks up from the road to catch sight of a terrifying image: a large machine with three legs towering in the distance. The machine goes about smashing everything in its way while firing a Heat-Ray, and the narrator abandons the horse. Not long after, he finds the innkeeper's dead body, and then makes his way to his own house, where he takes refuge for the night.

While hiding in his house, the narrator meets an artilleryman who has fled the pit and stumbled onto his property. The artilleryman tells him about the destruction wrought by the Martians and their fighting machines. The two men decide to set out together, the narrator wanting to meet up with his wife in Leatherhead, the artilleryman hoping to meet up again with his battery. On their way, they encounter scores of people running madly from five fighting machines, which discharge their Heat-Rays, torching everything around them. Realizing that water will protect him from the Heat-Ray's blasts, the narrator jumps into a stream, and others around him follow suit. At the same time, a large gun hidden by military fighters fires a shot that explodes in the face of one of the fighting machines. This shot takes down the machine, and the other machines flock to their fallen comrade before unleashing total fury onto the landscape with the Heat-Rays. The narrator passes out on the riverbank, narrowly avoiding getting stepped on by a machine before he's left alone.

The fighting machines return to their pit in Horsell Common, pulling their dead friend along with them. Meanwhile, the narrator notes that a new cylinder arrives every day, and the Martians grow increasingly powerful as they build their machines, which apparently can also discharge a deadly black smoke. During this time, the narrator wanders through the woods and eventually comes upon a frightened, hysterical curate, who asks the narrator what sins they could have committed to deserve such a punishment. The narrator

responds by telling the curate to be a man, and asks what religion is good for if it “collapses under calamity.” Although he dislikes the curate, the narrator agrees to travel with him, and they set off so as to avoid encountering the Martians again.

At this point, the narrator tells the story of his brother’s experience during the Martian invasion. A medical student in London, his brother doesn’t hear about the Martians’ arrival for several days. When he finally does, he decides to visit his brother in Woking, hoping to see the aliens before they’re killed by military forces. When he goes to the train station, however, he learns that no trains are running in that direction due to an accident. Throughout the next day, he buys multiple newspapers in an attempt to gather more information about the invasion. When all at once Londoners are told to evacuate the city, he steals a bike from a ransacked cycle shop and rides out of town, eventually coming upon two women getting robbed. After he fends off the criminals, the brother joins these women in their carriage, and the three of them decide to combine their money in order to buy tickets out of the country on a boat. The brother’s story concludes as he sails into the distance while watching an extravagant battle between a warship called the Thunder Child and three Martian fighting machines.

As the narrator’s brother escapes England, the narrator and the curate continue their travels, eventually finding a well-stocked kitchen in an abandoned home. As they sit in this dark place, the sky lights up green and a huge crash sounds, ruining the house and knocking the narrator onto the floor, where he lies unconscious for several hours. When he comes to, the curate tells him to be quiet because the Martians are right outside. Apparently, a new cylinder has arrived, landing almost on top of the house in which they’re hiding and disabling them from leaving.

Over the course of fourteen days, the narrator lives in hiding, afraid to even speak in full volume to the curate. They periodically sneak from the pantry to the kitchen and peer through a hole in the wall. This is how the narrator learns that the Martians feed by extracting the blood of living humans, emitting a strange howl all the while. Although the kitchen contains some provisions, the narrator realizes that they’ll soon run out of food. The scarcity of rations is exacerbated by the gluttonous curate, who is constantly stuffing his face. Hoping to increase their chances of survival, the narrator implements a rationing scheme, cutting the curate off when he’s had too much. This deeply upsets the curate, who grows more and more unhinged until, finally, he has lost his mind. When the curate begins making too much noise, the narrator knocks him unconscious, but it’s already too late; a Martian appears at the hole in the wall. Quickly, the narrator retreats to the coal-cellar, where he shuts the door and covers himself with coal. The Martian eventually creeps toward him and opens the door but doesn’t notice him. It isn’t until several days later that he dares

to venture out of the cellar, only to find that the curate is dead and the Martians have moved on.

Out in the open again, the narrator once more encounters the artilleryman, who tells him what has happened in the past couple of weeks. “We’re beat!” he insists, going on to explain to the narrator that the Martians seem to be developing flying machines. Under these circumstances, the artilleryman has resolved to live the life of a “rat,” admonishing fellow humans who don’t have what it takes to survive. He tells the narrator of his plan to tunnel his way into the sewers of London, where he’ll live with a community of like-minded people—including the narrator—until perhaps one day he can learn how to hijack one of the Martians’ fighting machines. Impressed by how well-thought out this plan seems, the narrator accompanies the artilleryman back to a house, where the two men work for hours digging in the basement in order to intersect the sewer system. However, the narrator slowly realizes the artilleryman’s plan is doomed to fail, and he leaves the next morning, setting off for London.

When the narrator arrives in the city, he finds it desolate. The Martians have taken over all of London and their machines now stand tall and powerful throughout the city. A ghostly howl echoes through the streets as the narrator makes his way toward a fighting machine. To his surprise, it does nothing, simply standing still as he approaches. Finally, he comes upon a huge mound at the top of a hill where the Martians seem to have made their largest dwelling area yet. As he looks up at one of the enormous stationary machines, he sees **red weed** and decay seeping out of the cockpit, and realizes that the Martians must have died of a bacterial infection. In the weeks, months, and years that follow, the world learns that the immune systems of these otherworldly creatures weren’t prepared to defend against earthly bacteria, so their bodies couldn’t handle the infection. In the wake of the Martians’ short stay, humanity rebuilds itself, but the narrator warns against relaxing into a state of comfort, reminding readers that the invaders could come again. Next time, he hopes the human race will be more prepared.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

The Narrator – A man who tells the story of the Martian invasion. The narrator describes himself as a “professed and recognized writer on philosophical themes.” He is an intellectually curious, open-minded person who possesses more scientific knowledge than the average civilian. Nonetheless, he takes measures to make sure readers know that he’s chiefly a philosophical writer, not a scientist. Because of this, the story he recounts doesn’t focus solely on the scientific explanations of alien life, but on his experience (and

on his brother's experience) of the Martian invasion. He is particularly well-equipped to narrate this tale because he personally witnesses the arrival of the first Martians. After observing the damage the Martians are capable of inflicting, he rushes home to his wife, whom he tries to calm despite his own fears about these dangerous creatures. This tendency to emotionally withdraw from reality is characteristic of the narrator, who later writes, "At times I suffer from the strangest sense of detachment from myself and the world about me." Of course, his ability to identify this psychological coping mechanism is evidence of the fact that he is also a thoughtful and reflective person. He is driven to write this story in part by a desire to rehash the horrifying experience he underwent while trying to find his wife amidst the chaos of the Martian invasion. Furthermore, he sees it as his responsibility as a writer to remind his fellow humans that, although the Martians have failed in their invasion, earth may not remain a "secure abiding-place for Man" indefinitely.

The Artilleryman – A soldier who operates one of the large guns used to fight the Martians. When the horse he's riding falls into a ditch, the gun he and his comrades are manning is exploded by a Martian Heat-Ray. Too terrified to move, the artilleryman hides under his dead horse. Eventually, the fighting machine leaves, at which point the artilleryman crawls away and makes for the woods, finally coming upon the narrator's home. The narrator lets him inside and gives him a glass of whiskey while listening to his horrific story. The two men decide to set out together the next day, but are quickly separated in a frenzied encounter with the Martians. The narrator later encounters the artilleryman after spending many days in hiding. Having seen the worst of the Martians, the artilleryman explains his plan for survival, telling the narrator that humans must go on living "for the sake of the breed" and that doing so will require reverting to the lifestyle of a sewer rat. He criticizes society for being too soft and weak, saying that people have gotten used to luxury and forgotten about survival. However, the artilleryman reveals himself to be overzealous when the narrator and he start digging in an attempt to reach the sewer system and he repeatedly suggests breaks for food and drink. In the end, the narrator sees that he's a lazy and fearful man with absurd and lofty ideas about humanity.

The Curate – A religious man who has spent his life working for the church. The curate is inconsolable in his grief over the Martian invasion, utterly unable to fathom why such a terrible fate has come upon humankind. His conception of life is based on his faith, which fails to help him account for the arrival of such malicious creatures. "Why are these things permitted? What sins have we done?" the curate wails to the narrator, who—as a man devoted to reason—finds this line of thinking distasteful, even characterizing such complaints as "selfish despair." After running into one another in the woods, the two men travel together and take shelter in an abandoned house.

As they hide, yet another Martian cylinder crashes to earth, half-burying the house and keeping them from leaving. The curate and the narrator are forced to remain with one another in the kitchen, scurrying back and forth to the pantry and eating the small amount of food available there. As the days pass, the narrator grows increasingly agitated by the curate, who begins to eat large quantities despite the fact that the two men are in grave danger of starving to death. When the narrator tries to cut the curate off from the food supply, the curate acts childishly and eventually goes out of his mind, daring to speak at full volume despite the risk of being heard by the Martians just outside. Finally, in a fit of reckless despair, the curate ventures into the kitchen with the aim of making his presence known to the Martians. The narrator quickly knocks him out, but not before a Martian hears and finds its way into the kitchen—an event which marks the end of the curate's life.

The Narrator's Brother – A medical student who lives in London, and whose story the narrator provides as a way of showing readers the impact of the Martians throughout England. Upon hearing about the invasion, the narrator's brother decides to visit the narrator in Woking in order to see the Martians before they are killed. When he tries to travel, though, he finds that the train isn't running to Woking because of an accident. Gradually, the narrator's brother learns about the imminent threat the Martians pose. Finally, when all of London has worked itself into hysteria, he flees the city on a bicycle, which he abandons when the front tire punctures irreparably. On the crowded roads, he encounters two women getting robbed in their carriage by three men. After fighting off the criminals, he joins the women. One of them, Mrs. Elphinstone insists that they must find her husband, but the other woman—her sister-in-law—agrees to the narrator's brother's plan to pool their money together in order to flee the country altogether. Once they finally board a boat that will take them away, they witness a spectacular battle between Martian fighting machines and a naval ship called **the Thunder Child**, which floats low in the water and rams into the fighting machines' heads. As the narrator's brother and the Elphinstone women sail away from England, they watch the Thunder Child as it successfully overpowers the fighting machines in one of the only sequences in which humans triumph over Martians.

The Narrator's Wife – The unnamed woman who is married to the narrator. After Ogilvy is killed by the Martians, the narrator stumbles home, panicked and exhausted. When he starts telling his wife what has happened, her face goes white with fear. "They can scarcely move," he says reassuringly, explaining to her what Ogilvy told him about Earth's gravitational force and how it will affect the Martians. Several days after the Martians first arrive, the narrator and his wife decide to flee to Leatherhead, where some of their relatives live—but because the countryside has been plunged into chaos, this proves a difficult task. In order to make a successful escape, the narrator borrows a horse and

dogcart from an innkeeper, promising that he'll return it by midnight. For this reason, the narrator is forced to leave his wife in Leatherhead so that he can return the dogcart. By the time the narrator returns to Woking, however, the situation has grown far more dangerous, and as a result he remains separated from his wife until the very end of the novel. Finding her again becomes his ultimate goal, even when he knows it's likely that she has been killed. When the Martians finally succumb to earthly bacteria, though, he finds his way back to his home in Woking, and upon surveying the wreckage, he hears her voice behind him and rejoices at the fact that she's still alive.

Ogilvy – An astronomer who first tells the narrator about the strange explosions seen on Mars in the days leading up to the alien invasion. Ogilvy invites the narrator one night to view the anomaly through his telescope, and the narrator witnesses a “reddish flash at the edge” of the planet. Although neither he nor Ogilvy know it at the time, this flash is caused by the launching of the Martians' cylinders, which have already begun their journey to earth. When the narrator asks Ogilvy about the probability of alien life existing, the astronomer says, “The chances against anything man-like on Mars are a million to one.” He also tells the narrator that any living being from Mars would be unable to survive on Earth due to vast differences in the planets' gravitational fields. Despite his assuredness, Ogilvy is one of the first humans to die when the Martians arrive. In an attempt to communicate with the aliens, he and a small group of men—including Henderson, a journalist from London—approach the cylinder while waving a white flag. In response, the Martians decimate the men with Heat-Ray guns, instantly burning them to a char. However, this doesn't stop the narrator from relaying Ogilvy's ideas about gravity to his wife at dinner that night, even though it's rather clear that the astronomer was wrong to underestimate these extraordinary beings.

Mrs. Elphinstone – A woman the narrator's brother meets while fleeing London. When the narrator's brother first encounters her, Mrs. Elphinstone and her sister-in-law, Miss Elphinstone, are being attacked and robbed by three men. The narrator's brother helps fend off these criminals before joining the two women. They explain to him that Mrs. Elphinstone's husband awoke them in the middle of the night and told them to flee the area, saying he'd catch up with them later. For this reason, Mrs. Elphinstone can hardly take her mind off finding her husband, thus making it difficult for the narrator's brother to convince her to travel onward and to eventually escape the country altogether. Nonetheless, she consents to his plan and agrees to pool her money with his to buy tickets on a boat to take them away from England.

The Innkeeper – The landlord of an inn and bar called the Spotted Dog. The innkeeper owns a horse and dogcart, both of which he lends to the narrator for two pounds on the condition

that both be returned by midnight. The narrator uses the horse and dogcart to take his wife to Leatherhead, but when he returns, he finds that the innkeeper has been flung against a fence and killed.

Henderson – A journalist from London, whom Ogilvy encounters on the road after first seeing the Martian cylinder. Henderson is the first person to actually believe Ogilvy about the cylinder, and he hurries to see for himself. He then goes to the train station and sends a telegraph to London about the mysterious arrival. Along with Ogilvy, Henderson is part of the group of men who approach the cylinder with a white flag in the hopes of communicating with the Martians. Like Ogilvy, though, he is quickly scorched to death by the Heat-Ray.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Miss Elphinstone – Mrs. Elphinstone's sister-in-law, whom the narrator's brother meets while fleeing London. Unlike Mrs. Elphinstone, Miss Elphinstone is more immediately receptive to the narrator's brother's plan to travel together and leave England by boat.



THEMES

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ORDER, SUBORDINATION, AND HIERARCHY

The Martians hold dominion over England during their short stay in *The War of the Worlds*. If not for the bacteria that eventually kills them, it seems certain that they would go on to rule the animal kingdom, replacing humans at the top of the world's pecking order. As a result of this reshuffling of the hierarchy, the Martians' presence brings about significant changes amongst humans. Amidst the chaos of the Martian attack, many characters lose all sense of order and, in some cases, decency. Conversely, others seem to commit themselves even more devoutly to the hierarchies and forms of order to which they've always adhered. By highlighting this range of reactions—in addition to examining the temporary demotion of humankind to the status of a subordinate species—Wells reveals that humanity's sense of order and control is perhaps more fragile than people would like to think. When the Martians first arrive, many Englanders are slow to recognize the danger the creatures represent. Even after the aliens have already killed a handful of men—men waving a peace flag and trying to communicate—people continue to act as if the rules of their small, protected world still apply. Unable

to reckon with the horror of the Martian invasion, Englanders instead try to preserve the social structures they've relied upon for their entire lives. The narrator remarks upon this, saying, "The most extraordinary thing to my mind, of all the strange and wonderful things that happened upon that Friday, was the dovetailing of the commonplace habits of our social order with the first beginnings of the series of events that was to topple that social order headlong." This "dovetailing" of the everyday with the catastrophic is reflective of a more general effort, on the part of the public in Orwell's novel, to keep at bay the emotional terror that comes with the toppling of their social order. Similarly, people foolishly cling to markers of social class in a way that prevents them from acknowledging the full danger of the situation. For example, when Ogilvy runs to inform others about the cylinder, he comes upon a wagoner who ignores him because of his disheveled appearance. The wagoner, it seems, can only focus on the fact that Ogilvy isn't wearing a hat (and thus not adhering to the social norms of British society), and therefore doesn't heed Ogilvy's warning. That the wagoner is blinded by such a trivial matter just suggests that society's focus on the insignificant details of its social order has eclipsed common sense and decency.

Unlike those who refuse to admit that the invasion has disrupted the world order, some people try to capitalize on the collective loss of a sense of order. These characters see chaos as an opportunity, realizing that powerful people are no longer safely protected or separated from the masses. Although this is arguably an immoral and opportunistic way of behaving in a time of crisis, it's true that the appearance of the Martians effectively upturns many of society's hierarchies, ultimately putting everybody on the same level and rendering wealthy people vulnerable in ways they may never have experienced before. This is evident when the narrator's brother comes upon two women getting mugged and robbed by three men. After he saves the women from the three criminals, he learns that they set out in their carriage alone after one of their husbands armed them with a pistol and urged them to flee the town. Moreover, the narrator notes that these women are alone in their travels because their servant left them two days before. Abandoned by the lower class, these wealthy women suddenly must fend for themselves, contending with bandits and anybody else who wants to take advantage of them. As such, readers come to understand that these characters have undergone a total reordering of their world. While the Martians go about destroying the physical structures of society—churches and houses and entire towns—humans, in the chaos, dismantle the hierarchies that have defined their society for centuries.

In addition to prompting a reshuffling of power amongst humans, the Martians' attack gives the narrator a new perspective on the hierarchies of the natural world. Upon reemerging after two weeks of hiding underground, he finds

himself dizzied by the realization that humans have fallen from their position as the earth's dominant species. He writes, "I felt as a rabbit might feel returning to his burrow and suddenly confronted by the work of a dozen busy navvies digging the foundations of a house. I felt [...] a sense of dethronement, a persuasion that I was no longer a master, but an animal among the animals, under the Martian heel." The narrator characterizes this realization as being "beyond the common range of men," suggesting that humans rarely ponder the nature of their existence on earth. Rather, they take their high position in the natural order for granted, hardly ever pausing to consider their good fortune. His words suggest that part of what it means to be human is to be dominant and powerful—a notion which becomes all the more apparent when the narrator defines what has happened to humans as a "dethronement." When the Martians reduce the empire of man to rubble, suddenly humans not only find themselves equal to one another, but also equal to lowly creatures like rabbits and rats. Consequently, people like the narrator are forced to come to terms with the idea that human dominion isn't a fact of life, but rather a delicate reality that is just waiting to be thrown off balance.



THE OTHER AND THE UNKNOWN

With its lush descriptions of otherworldly creatures and unfathomable machines, *The War of the Worlds* underscores that all alien stories are, at their root, stories about discomfort with—and fear of—the unknown. Wells's story falls under the broad category of "invasion literature," a genre of fiction made famous by Colonel George Chesney's "The Battle of Dorking" (1871) which details a hypothetical invasion of England by German forces. Englanders were perhaps especially anxious about the prospect of invasion, perhaps in part because a history of colonialism meant, among other things, that their country had always been the conqueror, never the conquered. As Brian Aldiss writes in his introduction to *The War of the Worlds*, Chesney's use of "the device of future war and sudden invasion, which exposes the unprepared nation to inevitable defeat, aroused fears and imitations everywhere." *The War of the Worlds* was one such imitation, but Wells's choice to have the invaders hail from Mars took the genre one step further, emphasizing his countrymen's hysterical fear of the foreigner—or the "other"—making their way into England. The Martians, for their part, embody the mysteriousness and inscrutability that characterize the other in the imaginations of the people. As such, these creatures are the ultimate manifestation of otherness. In turn, the public's uncontrollable fear of the invaders mirrors the xenophobia that was rampant throughout England in the late 19th century.

The narrator's overwhelming fear of the Martians (and the mystery surrounding them) throws him into a state of

confusion about even his own familiar surroundings. “The fear I felt was no rational fear,” he writes, “but a panic terror not only of the Martians but of the dusk and stillness all about me.” Suddenly, with the introduction of an unknown species, he sees his world anew. He finds himself disoriented by simple things like “the dusk and stillness” of the surrounding landscape. This is perhaps because he’s seeing the world through new eyes, imagining what earth must look like to these foreigners. It’s worth noting that he admits his fear is irrational, since it suggests that Wells understands that it’s necessary to levelheadedly come to terms with the presence of an outsider, even when doing so may bring on a state of “panic terror.” While the narrator’s countrymen respond to this terror by frantically and pointlessly firing guns at the enormous fighting machines, the narrator merely takes in the new landscape around him in an attempt to reconcile himself to the presence of the other.

The narrator’s willingness to step outside his limited viewpoint and reexamine his immediate reality shows that the Martians have a strong effect on human psychology. Their arrival prompts self-reflection and evaluation. For instance, their presence causes the narrator to observe the following about himself: “At times I suffer from the strangest sense of detachment from myself and the world about me.” Not only does the narrator find himself scrutinizing his surroundings (the “dusk and stillness”) with new eyes, but he also finds himself assessing the way he—as a human—processes the world, realizing that he often tends to detach himself from reality, as he tries to do in this moment while wandering home after witnessing the Martians’ first violent act. “I seem to watch it all from the outside,” he realizes, “out of time, out of space, out of the stress and tragedy of it all.” That the narrator’s realization about himself is spurred by the Martian invasion suggests that the arrival of outsiders presents people with an opportunity for self-reflection and growth. Although the Martians are dangerous and pose a great challenge to humanity, their arrival causes the narrator to develop a greater understanding of himself and the world around him. Forced into a situation in which he can’t detach from “the stress and tragedy” around him, he instead reckons with his own emotional escapism.

Although religion doesn’t play a major role in *The War of the Worlds*, it’s worth examining Wells’s treatment of religion in relation to the theme of the unknown in the novel. Unlike the narrator, the curate is unable to come to terms with the presence of the mysterious Martians because he has devoted his entire life to God, and the existence of aliens doesn’t fit into the religious framework through which he views the world. As a result, he feels pessimistic and defeated, simultaneously unwilling to renounce his religious views and unable to understand how his beliefs might account for this strange new reality. Simply put, the curate is no longer confident in his system of belief and is therefore suddenly thrust into a state of unknowing. At the same time, he also feels entitled to safety

and justice as a reward for his past devotion. “Why are these things permitted?” he wails. “What sins have we done?” Later, he adds, “All the work—all the Sunday-schools—What have we done—What has Weybridge done?” By asking what he has “done,” he bitterly implies that he doesn’t deserve to experience the horror of the Martian invasion, but should be protected because of his piety. A man of philosophy and reason, the narrator finds this line of thinking pathetic, asking “What good is religion if it collapses under calamity?” In this moment, the narrator suggests that the ultimate end of religion is to comfort people in times of difficulty. However, the curate’s religious views don’t help him to cope with the Martian invasion—they only serve to prevent him from accepting the objective nature of his new reality. In this way, Wells calls attention to the psychological acrobatics humans put themselves through in order to avoid reconciling themselves to otherness and the threat of the unknown—a phenomenon Wells no doubt witnessed at the end of the 19th century as his fellow citizens fretted over the prospect of foreign invasion.



NEWS AND THE DISSEMINATION OF INFORMATION

Information is a vital resource during the Martians’ attack on England in *The War of the Worlds*, and how information is disseminated becomes a key theme, as the narrator makes clear early in the novel that the newspapers are able to sway people’s minds. As various bits of information work their way through England, it becomes evident that the dissemination of information doesn’t always serve the end of protecting people. Instead, people often pass along facts and fragments of news to comfort one another, or even to make a profit. This, however, only puts humanity at a disadvantage, and Wells demonstrates that people often assuage unpleasant thoughts by whatever means possible, distracting themselves by telling soothing lies or by focusing on secondary concerns like financial gain.

In many cases throughout *The War of the Worlds*, the newspapers fail to accurately report on the Martian invasion, especially during the first several days. Initial telegraphs about the incident (not including Ogilvy’s) embody the cavalier attitude most people have at the beginning of the invasion. One even reads, “Formidable as they seem to be, the Martians have not moved from the pit into which they have fallen, and, indeed, seem incapable of doing so. Probably this is due to the relative strength of the earth’s gravitational energy.” The narrator adds to this account, writing, “On that last text the leader-writers expanded very comfortingly.” His use of the word “comfortingly” is especially important here because it illustrates how eager people are to seek refuge in the reassuring words of supposed experts and “leader-writers” (i.e., senior journalists). Suddenly, any sense of urgency falls away when a specialist delivers information, regardless of how accurate this

information is. It's not hard to see, then, that the news can have a very dangerous effect on the population, since an accurate understanding and a sense of urgency are absolutely critical in any emergency, let alone an alien invasion. If people believe there's no true cause for alarm, they won't adequately prepare for the very real danger they face.

At first, even the narrator indulges the fantasy that there is no cause for urgency or panic regarding the Martian invasion. He spreads this delusion to his wife on the first night of the attack, when the Martians have just landed but have not yet begun to fully wreak havoc. Both to calm his own nerves and to comfort his wife, he tells her an array of facts, delighting in the information as if knowledge itself can protect him. "In particular," he writes, "I laid stress on the gravitational difficulty. On the surface of the earth the force of gravity is three times what it is on the surface of Mars. A Martian, therefore, would weigh three times more than on Mars, albeit his muscular strength would be the same. His own body would be a cope of lead to him." The narrator tells his wife these bits of information as they sit at their dinner table only miles away from the Martians, who have already killed a handful of humans. The fact that he and his wife can eat a meal and calmly discuss these matters illustrates how much comfort they take in (supposedly) understanding the science behind what's happening. Moreover, it's strange that the narrator relies on what Ogilvy told him as a way of quieting his nerves, considering that Ogilvy himself was killed by the Martians—a clear indication that scientific knowledge will do nothing to protect humans against these alien invaders. Nonetheless, the possession of information—accurate or not—gives the narrator a sense of agency and control, allowing him to avoid feeling completely helpless.

In addition to being used to create a false sense of security, information about the invasion is also twisted and misused for financial benefit. For example, upon finally realizing that the Martians do in fact pose a great threat to humanity, one newspaper takes advantage of the situation, exploiting it to make money. "In Wellington Street my brother met a couple of sturdy roughs who had just rushed out of Fleet Street with still wet newspapers and staring placards," the narrator writes. "'Dreadful catastrophe!' they bawled one to the other down Wellington Street. 'Fighting at Weybridge! Full description! Repulse of the Martians! London in Danger!' He had to give threepence for a copy of that paper." In this scene, Wells emphasizes how quickly critical information can be sensationalized. Of course, this greedy exploitation of humankind's attraction to disaster and travesty is a complete misuse of the power of the media, which in this moment should focus not on writing papers that will fetch threepence per copy, but on responsibly conveying whatever information is necessary to help people survive the Martian invasion.

Furthermore, the papers seem to misunderstand the severity

of the situation. In a world dominated by Martians—a world in which the only humans left alive must sneak through sewers to avoid detection—money will mean nothing. That the editors of such sensationalist papers so desperately try to capitalize on the invasion—penning catchy, dramatic headlines like "Dreadful catastrophe!"—shows that they mistakenly view capital gain as an end in and of itself, conspicuously ignoring the impending doom of the world as they know it. The narrator calls this a "grotesque mingling of profit and panic." Unfortunately, when the news is used to propagate terror in the name of money, humankind is deprived of one of its few real chances at survival: free access to accurate information.

When considering the role of newspapers and the dissemination of information in *The War of the Worlds*, it's worth remembering that the novel itself was originally serialized in 1897 in *Pearson's Magazine*, a British periodical that appeared each month. This method of publishing stories was quite common in the 19th century, when newspapers and magazines would print longer works of fiction in several installments. Often, an installment would end on a suspenseful note so that readers would be more likely to purchase the following issue. Of course, it's somewhat ironic that Wells's novel—which seems to criticize the use of sensationalist writing for capitalistic gain—appeared in this highly-commercialized format. Nonetheless, this style of publication actually fits the content of the novel quite well, as the medium lends a certain credibility to the text, as if Wells's narrator is recounting a true tale, framing it as a piece of nonfiction. In fact, Wells plays with this idea by having the narrator make frequent passing references to himself, insinuating that he—the narrator—is "a professed and recognized writer on philosophical themes." By casting his fiction as a true story written by a "recognized writer," Wells puts his readers in the same situation in which the narrator finds himself as he wanders from town to town trying desperately to ascertain new details about the invasion.



EVOLUTION AND SURVIVAL

In *The War of the Worlds*, Wells explores the extremes of what is possible under evolution and natural selection. Compared to humans, the Martians are highly advanced in their technology, suggesting that their evolutionary history is also longer than that of humans. Although the narrator says they "may be descended from beings not unlike" humans, it's clear the Martians are much further along in their process of evolution than humans. Their advanced abilities make it easy for them to not only land on another planet, but also to swiftly destroy entire towns and cities. Despite their sophisticated development, however, they fall prey to the simplest of enemies: earthly bacteria. Indeed, it's ironic that their undoing comes in the form of a small and ordinary menace against which humans—regardless of their lesser powers—have developed a tolerance. In this way, Wells

shows readers that evolutionary progress and development isn't magical, but rather a process that plays out according to a specific set of environmental circumstances. This is an important message, given that Darwin's theory of evolution wasn't yet widely accepted when *The War of the Worlds* first appeared in print, despite being almost forty years old. As such, Wells's novel is as much a demonstration of and argument for the truth of evolution as it is an entertaining tale of survival.

Although the Martians possess unstoppable intelligence along with seemingly supernatural powers, they have evolved these strengths in response to their own planet, rendering their bodies unfit for life on earth. Humans, on the other hand (like all animals on earth), have developed immunities to earth's various threats and challenges, and this is their only advantage in the struggle against the Martians. Following this logic, the hero of *The War of the Worlds* is arguably not a person, a weapon, or an organization—but rather the very process of natural selection itself. Through natural selection, humans have built up an immunity to bacteria, giving them a resisting power against the organisms that eventually kill the Martians. Although the Martians have clearly met other challenges on their own planet, they haven't encountered the same bacteria that are found on earth, thus rendering them helpless against infection. By pitting such superior beings against such a simple enemy—everyday bacteria—Wells demystifies Darwin's ideas about evolution, demonstrating that natural selection is a very simple matter of adapting—or failing to adapt—to one's environment.

In addition to his consideration of literal survival, Wells illustrates how the adaptive process can also take place in the mind. In other words, he highlights how survival is both a physical and mental endeavor. Indeed, human survival in *The War of the Worlds* sometimes seems as much related to a certain outlook as to actual bodily safety. Faced with the Martians' threat, humans must react according to the circumstances unfolding before them. Unfortunately, most of the narrator's fellow humans respond to the Martian invasion inappropriately, failing to accurately understand the reality of the situation. The military, for example, exacerbates the Martians' fury by continuously firing weapons at them, a futile endeavor that only leads to further destruction. Furthermore, most citizens treat the invasion as if it's a natural disaster, openly fleeing from one town to the next with seemingly no understanding that—unlike a hurricane or flood—the Martians can easily follow them from town to town. The artilleryman, on the other hand, appears to better grasp the importance of adapting to danger in a manner that actually matches the nature of the threat. Having seen that military action and standard evacuation are both useless, he alters his personal survival plan, resolving to live like a "rat" in hiding by moving into the sewer system. This is perhaps an unglamorous course of action, but it shows his willingness to adapt mentally to changing external circumstances. Recognizing that the Martians will kill him no matter what he

does to stop them, he attempts to remove himself from the situation entirely. Ultimately, this adaptive mindset saves his life.

The artilleryman's outlook also contains an implicit critique of the posh and complacent lifestyle of the bourgeoisie of the Victorian era. He speaks disparagingly about Englanders, criticizing the way they used to "skeddaddle" from work to home and from home to church, fearing trivial things all the while and worrying about money or social status. It's no wonder, then, that very few people seem to respond appropriately to the threat of the Martians. The artilleryman portrays the people of England as a group accustomed to comfort, who take safety and survival for granted. To live like a "rat" is simply unfathomable to them because it is so far outside their conception of what it means to live. As a result, they run from town to town, hoping each time they'll recapture the life they led before the invasion. Simply put, they don't want to change, even though failure to adapt, in light of the Martians' arrival, spells certain death. By contrast, the artilleryman is perfectly willing to give up his old lifestyle in the name of survival. He suggests that humanity has strayed too far from the true nature of existence, which revolves around struggle and the will to survive. "Life is real again," he says, implying that the pre-Martian world of Victorian England *wasn't* "real," and that a decadent, bourgeois lifestyle is out of touch with the fact that living is, for many, a constant fight for survival.

With the new challenges presented by the Martian invasion, the human race's evolutionary process is ultimately sped along, though not necessarily in a biological sense. The narrator touches upon this when he says, "It may be that in the larger design of the universe this invasion from Mars is not without its ultimate benefit for men; it has robbed us of that serene confidence in the future which is the most fruitful source of decadence, the gifts to human science it has brought are enormous, and it has done much to promote the conception of the commonweal of mankind." It's important to note that in this passage, the narrator lists primarily intellectual triumphs, not physical or biological advancements that have come as a result of the Martian invasion. He asserts that the invasion has contributed to humanity's scientific endeavors while also stripping away society's "serene confidence in the future," which renders the species unprepared for the challenges it must face. In turn, *The War of the Worlds* not only clarifies the basic truth of Darwin's evolutionary theory, but also advocates for advances in public thought and study, framing intellectual pursuit as a viable means of improving humankind's resilience, longevity, and ultimately its chances of survival.





SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



THE RED WEED

As the Martians triumph throughout England in *The War of the Worlds*, a fungal red weed quickly spreads through the land, entangling and engulfing other plants and even enshrouding entire houses. Much like the Martians themselves, the otherworldly plant is highly invasive and enjoys immediate success when it comes to triumphing over its new environment. The red weed is symbolic of the formidable power and aggressive conquest of the Martians themselves, pointing to the potential for the delicate ecosystem of life on earth to be thrown off balance overnight. Much like the aliens, the suddenly omnipresent red weed often overwhelms the narrator, making him feel as if he's suddenly awoken to find himself on a completely unknown planet, accentuating his sense of disorientation and obscuring his connection to his native planet. For example, in the days after the curate dies in the kitchen, the red weed grows over the room's only peephole, thereby confining the narrator in a lonely place that glows with the plant's extraterrestrial hue. In order to finally see outside the walls of his strange prison, the narrator has to summon the courage to move the weed aside with his hand. However, like the Martians it represents, the red weed falls prey to earthly bacteria, and by the time the narrator thwarts his misgivings and exits the kitchen, the fungal mess of weeds is already dead and rotting. In a gesture that is as symbolic as it is repulsive, the narrator grabs a stalk of the weed and chews it, inadvertently proving the strength of his immunity to the very same micro-organisms that have destroyed the plant.

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

These are the opening sentences of *The War of the Worlds*, which immediately establish an uneasiness regarding “intelligences greater than man’s.” The discomfort the narrator relays in this moment carries throughout the book, as humans struggle to accept that the Martians are superior not only because of their evolutionarily advanced physiology, but because they’ve “scrutinized and studied” humankind for many years. Indeed, these creatures have been watching the world “keenly and closely,” so it should come as no surprise to readers when, for example, the narrator later encounters an alien capable of opening a door. At the same time, the narrator shows his ability to put things into perspective, admitting that the Martians’ observation of earth is no different than humankind’s study of “the transient creatures that swarm and multiply in a drop of water.” This frames the Martians’ arrival in relatable terms: much like humans, they’re only interested in learning about other species in order to advance their own kind. Suddenly, then, the Martians go from cruel antagonistic creatures to unfortunate but understandable natural enemies.

☞ And we men, the creatures who inhabit this earth, must be to them at least as alien and lowly as are the monkeys and lemurs to us. The intellectual side of man already admits that life is an incessant struggle for existence, and it would seem that this too is the belief of the minds upon Mars. Their world is far gone in its cooling, and this world is still crowded with life, but crowded only with what they regard as inferior animals. To carry warfare sunward is, indeed, their only escape from the destruction that generation after generation creeps upon them.

And before we judge of them too harshly we must remember what ruthless and utter destruction our own species has wrought, not only upon animals, such as the vanished bison and the dodo, but upon its own inferior races.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

Once again, the narrator frames the Martians’ invasion of



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin Classics edition of *The War of the Worlds* published in 2005.

Book 1, Chapter 1 Quotes

☞ No one would have believed, in the last years of the nineteenth century, that this world was being watched keenly and closely by intelligences greater than man’s and yet as mortal as his own; that as men busied themselves about their various concerns they were scrutinized and studied, perhaps almost as narrowly as a man with a microscope might scrutinize the transient creatures that swarm and multiply in a drop of water. With infinite complacency men went to and fro over this globe about their little affairs, serene in their assurance of their empire over matter. It is possible that the infusoria under the microscope do the same.



Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

earth as a simple necessity, pointing out that the only way they can survive is by abandoning their uninhabitable planet and establishing a home on earth. In this moment, he speaks of the aliens' fight against humans as nothing more than a natural struggle unfolding in the animal kingdom, evoking the hierarchy and pecking order of life of earth. He reinforces this notion when he warns readers against judging the Martians "too harshly," considering that humans have wrought "ruthless and utter destruction" on other species. Worse, humanity has time and again brought fury down upon other humans, using rhetoric about "inferior races" in order to subjugate entire countries and classes of people. As if dominating the animal kingdom isn't enough, humans turn against each other and vie for power. This suggests that—until now—humanity has never encountered a species able to challenge it in earnest (except, perhaps, for other humans themselves). Now, though, the Martians pose the first real threat to impose upon humans the very "incessant struggle for existence" with which most other animals have long contended.

Book 1, Chapter 5 Quotes

☹️ The fear I felt was no rational fear, but a panic terror not only of the Martians but of the dusk and stillness all about me. Such an extraordinary effect in unmanning me it had that I ran weeping silently as a child might do. Once I had turned, I did not dare look back.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 27

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator feels this "panic terror" after witnessing the Martians' heat-ray gun for the first time. It's worth noting that in this instant he draws a distinction between "rational fear" and "panic terror"; the former implies that certain kinds of fear are orderly and reasonable, whereas the latter implies that other kinds of fright are completely without logic. Indeed, the word "panic" denotes an abrupt and—more importantly—uncontrollable fear or anxiety that usually leads to unmitigated behavior and foolish decision-making. The narrator further accentuates the hysterical properties of the word "panic" by adding the word "terror," an even more extreme way of talking about fear. He goes to great lengths, then, to communicate to readers just how unsettling—"unmanning"—is the presence of the Martians, drawing out the implications of his unadulterated fear


perhaps in order to explain why he and his fellow humans respond to the Martian invasion with such disorganization and absence of mind.

Book 1, Chapter 7 Quotes

☹️ Perhaps I am a man of exceptional moods. I do not know how far my experience is common. At times I suffer from the strangest sense of detachment from myself and the world about me; I seem to watch it all from the outside, from somewhere inconceivably remote, out of time, out of space, out of the stress and tragedy of it all. This feeling was very strong upon me that night. Here was another side to my dream.

But the trouble was the blank incongruity of this serenity and the swift death flying yonder, not two miles away.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 32

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the narrator describes the state of mind he experiences while stumbling home after the Martians first use the Heat-Ray to destroy Horsell Common. His tendency to watch the world "from the outside" is a coping mechanism, a way of gaining psychological distance from horrific and incomprehensible events. He confirms this notion when he admits that, when in this mindset, he watches life play out while existing somehow "out of the stress and tragedy of it all." But while this technique may help him cope with "stress and tragedy," it does nothing to alter reality, leaving him to reconcile "the blank incongruity" of his "serenity" with bleak and harsh realities like (in this case) the fact that "swift death" is "flying yonder" on Horsell Common.

Nonetheless, the narrator's tendency to step outside himself in moments of extreme terror is ultimately a survival tactic, since remaining mentally sound helps his ability to stay alive. This is made overwhelmingly clear when he's later cooped up with the curate for two weeks. While the curate slowly unravels, the narrator is able to hold himself together; in the end, the curate goes crazy and marches brazenly toward his own death, proving that the narrator's capacity to protect himself in this way does, in the end, save his life.

●● I began to comfort her and myself by repeating all that Ogilvy had told me of the impossibility of the Martians establishing themselves on the earth. In particular I laid stress on the gravitational difficulty. On the surface of the earth the force of gravity is three times what it is on the surface of Mars. A Martian, therefore, would weigh three times more than on Mars, albeit his muscular strength would be the same. His own body would be a cope of lead to him. That, indeed, was the general opinion. Both the *Times* and the *Daily Telegraph*, for instance, insisted on it the next morning, and both overlooked, just as I did, two obvious modifying influences. [...]

But I did not consider these points at the time, and so my reasoning was dead against the chances of the invaders. With wine and food, the confidence of my own table, and the necessity of reassuring my wife, I grew by insensible degrees courageous and secure.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Ogilvy, The Narrator's Wife

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 33

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator takes measures in this passage to “comfort” his wife, even though he’s just spent several minutes telling her the horrific things he witnessed at Horsell Common (including Ogilvy’s death). He suddenly pivots from lamenting the terror of the Martians to assuring his wife of the “impossibility” that the aliens will be able to survive in this terrestrial atmosphere. It’s odd, though, that he repeats to her everything Ogilvy told him about the Martians’ ineptitude, since Ogilvy is one of the first humans to be killed by the aliens. Though this should perhaps alert the narrator to the fact that Ogilvy was over-confident, he’s more interested in putting his wife at ease. In doing so, he also seems to put *himself* at ease, a fact that illustrates how swiftly humans can reframe and distort information in order to calm their own nerves. One might argue that this kind of hopeful rationalization is the same kind of “insensible” optimism that the newspapers later propagate. With the “confidence of [his] own table,” the narrator unabashedly convinces himself that everything will turn out fine.

Book 1, Chapter 8 Quotes

●● The most extraordinary thing to my mind, of all the strange and wonderful things that happened upon that Friday, was the dovetailing of the commonplace habits of our social order with the first beginnings of the series of events that was to topple that social order headlong.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 35



Explanation and Analysis

In this moment, the narrator examines the odd way people try to simply go about their everyday lives in the midst of disaster and calamity. Although he himself often behaves in the same way by eating a calm dinner, drinking whiskey, and later chatting with the milkman, he’s still able to note how strange it is that there unfolds a “dovetailing” of “commonplace habits” with the horror of an alien invasion. This, it seems, is part of what it means to be alive as a human, since people can’t constantly upend their routines in order to pay full attention to each new crisis as it unfolds. At the same time, certain crises—like, say, the complete decimation of humankind by alien forces—deserve humanity’s undivided attention. The fact that the narrator’s fellow citizens are allowing their everyday lives to carry on as usual while hostile Martians arrive on earth indicates that humanity hasn’t yet fully comprehended the severity of the situation. Although the narrator is perhaps naïve when it comes to his conception of the aliens, he at least understands how foolhardy it is to completely discount the invasion as yet another trivial disturbance that can be idly considered alongside the “commonplace habits of [the] social order.”

Book 1, Chapter 11 Quotes

●● They seemed amazingly busy. I began to ask myself what they could be. Were they intelligent mechanisms? Such a thing I felt was impossible. Or did a Martian sit within each, ruling, directing, using, much as a man’s brain sits and rules in his body? I began to compare the things to human machines, to ask myself for the first time in my life how an ironclad or a steam-engine would seem to an intelligent lower animal.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 51

Explanation and Analysis

This passage appears as the narrator looks out the window of his study and beholds the Martians as they move around in their machines on Horsell Common. What's most interesting about this short rumination is that the otherworldly creatures and all their mysterious machines throw the narrator into a state of wonder and curiosity not only about the Martians themselves, but about his own species. Indeed, he considers "steam-engine[s]" and "ironclad[s]" (armored warships), pondering how the Martians might perceive such devices. Of course, the Martians do eventually encounter an ironclad, which is perhaps the only manmade object or machine that poses a real threat to their safety. Regardless of what the Martians actually think about these machines, though, it's important to note that elements of the unknown cause the narrator to reexamine humanity, looking at it from a new perspective. This, ultimately, is the greatest gift that the Martian invasion bestows upon humankind, for such changes in perspective—even in moments of extreme distress—yield innovation, advancement, and broadened horizons.

obvious, the curate is completely beside himself, cowering and scared. His viewpoint, though, is more complicated than it seems—on the one hand, he has devoted himself to religion and thus clings to a singular vision of reality and the world, looking to God for meaning; on the other hand, he can't quite make sense of the Martian invasion within his religious framework. As such, he oscillates between piety and hopelessness, trying to use religion to explain his current reality but unable to accept the implications of such an interpretation. He reasons that the Martians must be understood as God's avengers who have been loosed upon the earth to punish humankind for its sins. This is why the curate refers to this dreadful time period as "the great and terrible day of the Lord." At the same time, this also means that all of the curate's religious work has failed and that he too must perish along with the sinners, for clearly nothing is coming to save him. The narrator, for his part, cuts through all these equivocations and points out the curate's weak will, asking, "What good is religion if it collapses under calamity?" Indeed, religion is something people often look to in times of uncertainty. In turn, the curate *should* be able to face his fear of the unknown, but his inability to fully embody his own faith keeps him from doing so.



Book 1, Chapter 13 Quotes

☝☝ "This must be the beginning of the end," he said, interrupting me. "The end! The great and terrible day of the Lord! When men shall call upon the mountains and the rocks to fall upon them and hide them—hide them from the face of Him that sitteth upon the throne!"

I began to understand the position. I ceased my labored reasoning, struggled to my feet, and, standing over him, laid my hand on his shoulder.

"Be a man!" said I. "You are scared out of your wits! What good is religion if it collapses under calamity? Think of what earthquakes and floods, wars and volcanoes, have done before to men! Do you think God had exempted Weybridge? He is not an insurance agent, man."

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Curate

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 71



Explanation and Analysis

This is a conversation that the narrator and the curate engage in shortly after meeting one another. As is quite

Book 1, Chapter 15 Quotes

☝☝ No doubt the thought that was uppermost in a thousand of those vigilant minds, even as it was uppermost in mine, was the riddle—how much they understood of us. Did they grasp that we in our millions were organized, disciplined, working together? Or did they interpret our spurts of fire, the sudden stinging of our shells, our steady investment of their encampment, as we should the furious unanimity of onslaught in a disturbed hive of bees? Did they dream they might exterminate us? (At that time no one knew what food they needed.) A hundred such questions struggled together in my mind as I watched that vast sentinel shape. And in the back of my mind was the sense of all the huge unknown and hidden forces Londonward. Had they prepared pitfalls? Were the powdermills at Hounslow ready as a snare?

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 86

Explanation and Analysis

The questions the narrator poses in this passage concern themselves with what, exactly, the Martians understand about humanity. Although the narrator later learns that the

aliens have studied humans so attentively that they know even the small things about human life (like how to open doors), the question as to what they know about human emotion and community remains unanswered. To this end, the narrator wonders if the Martians intuit that humans are “organized,” “disciplined,” and capable of “working together.” Of course, it bears pointing out that humanity isn’t doing a very good job of “working together” to fight the Martians, but the question about how much the aliens know still stands. And although many of the narrator’s questions in this section are unanswerable, it is only natural that he should ask them, since facing the unknown means putting oneself in a place of contemplation and curiosity. Unfortunately, the “sense of all the huge unknown and hidden forces” lying in wait for humans ultimately overwhelms him, and his many answerless questions only exacerbate the intense experience of having been thrust into uncharted territory.

Book 1, Chapter 17 Quotes

☝☝ At the sight of the sea, Mrs Elphinstone, in spite of the assurances of her sister-in-law, gave way to panic. She had never been out of England before, she would rather die than trust herself friendless in a foreign country, and so forth. She seemed, poor woman, to imagine that the French and the Martians might prove very similar. She had been growing increasingly hysterical, fearful, and depressed during the two days’ journeyings. Her great idea was to return to Stanmore. Things had been always well and safe at Stanmore. They would find [her husband] at Stanmore.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Miss Elphinstone, The Narrator’s Brother, Mrs. Elphinstone

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 107

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Mrs. Elphinstone—one of the women the narrator’s brother encounters and travels with while fleeing London—unexpectedly tries to turn around, deciding that she doesn’t want to board the steamboat that her sister-in-law and the narrator’s brother have arranged to take them out of the country. Mrs. Elphinstone is apparently too afraid to leave the country, since she’s never done so and because—as the narrator jokes—she thinks the “French and the Martians might prove very similar.” This mentality suggests that she is, above all, rather xenophobic and unwilling to open her mind to new experiences or people.


That she would rather return to Stanmore—where Martians run rampant and dangerous—than travel to France reveals that she’s fearful of new places, thus depending too much on a misguided sense of nationalism. Of course, *The War of the Worlds* is itself a veiled critique of how unreasonably fearful Wells’s countrymen are of foreigners, and Mrs. Elphinstone’s headstrong desire to remain in England emphasizes the absurdity of such close-minded thinking.

Book 2, Chapter 6 Quotes

☝☝ In the end the red weed succumbed almost as quickly as it had spread. A cankering disease, due, it is believed, to the action of certain bacteria, presently seized upon it. Now, by the action of natural selection, all terrestrial plants have acquired a resisting power against bacterial diseases—they never succumb without a severe struggle, but the red weed rotted like a thing already dead. The fronds became bleached, and then shriveled and brittle. They broke off at the least touch, and the waters that had stimulated their early growth carried their last vestiges out to sea.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 145

Explanation and Analysis

Although the red weed quickly flourishes over the earth, it soon rots and “succumb[s]” to bacteria. In addition to what this passage actually says about the process of natural selection—explaining that “terrestrial plants have acquired a resisting power against bacterial diseases”—what’s important about these sentences is their position in the novel. Indeed, this description of the struggle against bacteria that the red weed faces comes two chapters before readers learn that the Martians themselves have succumbed to the same fate as this extraterrestrial plant. In the same way that the narrator says earlier that newspaper articles and cartoons about the strange flashes of light on Mars “prepare men’s minds” to receive the idea of Martians on earth, this passage prepares readers to understand the cause of the aliens’ eventual death. And because the red weed and its rapid growth is so symbolic of the Martians’ initial success, its swift decay foreshadows the novel’s end, demonstrating the sheer power of biology and the evolutionary process in general.

Book 2, Chapter 7 Quotes

☛☛ They just used to skeddaddle off to work—I've seen hundreds of 'em, bit of breakfast in hand, running wild and shining to catch their little season-ticket train, for fear they'd get dismissed if they didn't; working at businesses they were afraid to take the trouble to understand; skeddaddling back for fear they wouldn't be in time for dinner; keeping indoors after dinner for fear of the back-streets; and sleeping with the wives they married, not because they wanted them, but because they had a bit of money that would make for safety in their one little miserable skeddaddle through the world. Lives insured and a bit invested for fear of accidents. And on Sundays—fear of the hereafter.

Related Characters: The Artilleryman (speaker), The Narrator

Related Themes:  



Page Number: 155

Explanation and Analysis

The artilleryman speaks these words to the narrator upon finding him wandering Putney Hill. He's referring in this moment to privileged Englanders who seem to have lost touch with what it means to survive and be alive. His main critique of such people is that fear dictates their lives. This is evident in the way he talks about how they meaninglessly “skeddaddle” back and forth in order to avoid any missteps. Because of their fear of straying from the dictates of society—which uphold that everybody must have a good job, a good spouse, good savings—they never pay attention to the fact that they're *alive*, living in a world in which their only true obligation is to survive. This cynicism about society proves that the artilleryman has his own conception of what it means to be human, and his distaste for people who let fear run their lives indicates his willingness to live dangerously, slinking underneath the Martians and establishing a community of humans uninhibited by even a “fear of the hereafter.”

☛☛ And we form a band—able-bodied, clean-minded men. We're not going to pick up any rubbish that drifts in. Weaklings go out again. [...] Those who stop obey orders. Able-bodied, clean-minded women we want also—mothers and teachers. No lackadaisical ladies—no blasted rolling eyes. We can't have any weak or silly. Life is real again, and the useless and cumbersome and mischievous have to die. They ought to die. They ought to be willing to die. It's a sort of disloyalty, after all, to live and taint the race. And they can't be happy. Moreover, dying's none so dreadful.

Related Characters: The Artilleryman (speaker), The Narrator

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 157

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the artilleryman continues telling his plan to the narrator, insisting that only the most advanced and “able-bodied, clean-minded” humans will be able to survive the Martian invasion. Now that society's trifling excesses have all been stripped away—now that people no longer have to “skeddaddle” off to jobs they don't care about—“life is real again.” This phrase suggests that the artilleryman views survival as the essence of life; anything else, it seems, is a mere distraction. Hoping to reboot the human race, he refuses to allow any “weaklings” to figure into his plan, and his assertion that such people should be “willing to die” so as not to “taint the race” is perhaps the first hint that he is overzealous, unreasonable, and out of touch with reality.

Book 2, Chapter 8 Quotes

☛☛ For so it had come about, as indeed I and many men might have foreseen had not terror and disaster blinded our minds. These germs of disease have taken toll of humanity since the beginning of things—taken toll of our prehuman ancestors since life began here. But by virtue of this natural selection of our kind we have developed resisting-power; to no germs do we succumb without a struggle, and to many—those that cause putrefaction in dead matter, for instance—our living frames are altogether immune. But there are no bacteria in Mars, and directly these invaders arrived, directly they drank and fed, our microscopic allies began to work their overthrow. Already when I watched them they were irrevocably doomed, dying and rotting even as they went to and fro. It was inevitable. By the toll of a billion deaths man has bought his birthright of the earth, and it is his against all comers.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 168

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator says this upon learning that the Martians have succumbed to the “germs of disease” that have “taken toll of humanity since the beginning of things.” He notes that he and his fellow humans should have foreseen this, but their

minds were blinded by fear. In the same way that the curate's intense sense of fear destroys his capability of forethought, then, the sheer terror that the narrator feels at the beginning of the Martian invasion disables him from using reason to anticipate the situation's probable outcome. At the same time, though, it's worth noting that when the Martians arrived, nobody yet knows bacteria doesn't exist on Mars. As such, it's impossible to predict that the aliens are "irrevocably doomed."

Book 2, Chapter 10 Quotes

☛☛ At any rate, whether we expect another invasion or not, our views of the human future must be greatly modified by these events. We have learned now that we cannot regard this planet as being fenced in and a secure abiding-place for Man; we can never anticipate the unseen good or evil that may come upon us suddenly out of space. It may be that in the larger design of the universe this invasion from Mars is not without its ultimate benefit for men; it has robbed us of that serene confidence in the future which is the most fruitful source of decadence, the gifts to human it has brought are enormous, and it has done much to promote the conception of the commonweal of mankind.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 178

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator's final thoughts regarding the Martian invasion include both an appreciation of its overall effect and a sense of fear surrounding whether or not it will happen again. He notes that in the long run the invasion will most likely figure prominently in humankind's trajectory, since it alerted the race to the fact that their safety in the future can't be taken for granted. Whereas before humans were complacent, assuming themselves to be the most powerful beings on earth (and, for that matter, the universe), now they know the kind of intense strength they will have to face if the Martians ever find a way to overcome the problem posed to them by earth's bacteria. Indeed, no longer can civilization go about its daily life with "serene confidence," and this newfound appreciation of continued survival ultimately promotes the "commonweal" (i.e., the general welfare) of humanity.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

BOOK 1, CHAPTER 1: THE EVE OF THE WAR

The narrator begins his tale by stating that the world has long been watched by supremely intelligent beings. He notes that while humans have been scurrying about the earth worrying about trivial matters, wise extraterrestrial creatures have observed their movements “perhaps almost as narrowly as a man with a microscope might scrutinize the transient creatures that swarm and multiply in a drop of water.” Although no man, woman, or child has previously suspected there were superior beings living on Mars, an entire civilization of advanced Martians has been watching earth and plotting against the human race. And not long after the beginning of the twentieth century, the narrator writes, this fact brought itself to bear on humanity.

Reminding his readers that Mars is older than the earth, the narrator posits that life must have begun on the red planet long before the earliest stages of terrestrial life). Because the planet is further along in its development, however, it’s also colder and its oceans have shrunk, meaning that it is quickly becoming uninhabitable. This is why the Martians have focused their attention on earth, identifying it as a possible new home because of its warmth, its large quantities of water, and its vegetation.

Humans, the narrator explains, are surely nothing more to the Martians than monkeys and lemurs are to people. Indeed, humans are “inferior animals” compared to the Martians. The narrator notes that his readers shouldn’t judge the Martians “too harshly,” considering that for centuries human beings have wrought “ruthless and utter destruction” on both animals and other people. The Tasmanians, he points out, were all but wiped out by European settlers in the course of a mere 50 years.

The narrator describes the first signs of life on Mars, explaining that a bright light is visible on the surface of the planet during the astronomical opposition of 1894, when Mars is closest to earth. A number of British observatories note this phenomenon but don’t know what to make of it. In retrospect, the narrator believes these flashes may have been caused by the “huge gun” that catapults the Martians to earth. At the time, the newspapers hardly report on the strange occurrence, completely unaware that the flares coming from Mars represent the greatest threat the earth has ever faced.

The opening of The War of the Worlds alludes to Antony van Leeuwenhoek, a scientist who in the 17th century fashioned his own microscope and studied a droplet of water. Inside this single droplet, he found hordes of micro-organisms, all undetectable to the naked human eye. This was a groundbreaking discovery, as it suggested that life on earth was much more complex than anybody had previously known. Wells begins his tale with this allusion as a way of reminding readers how impressive and multifaceted earthly life can be—an important thing to remember while reading this novel about otherworldly creatures and how the process of evolution influences everyday survival.



In this moment, Wells frames the Martians’ interest in conquering earth as a simple biological and ecological necessity. Although it may later seem as if these extraterrestrial creatures crave dominance and destruction, their main goal is simply to survive. Since their own planet is no longer able to support them, they must seek out new options.



By referencing Tasmania—which England colonized in the early 1800s—Wells reveals his interest in exploring the nature of conquest. His comparison of the world-endingly violent Martian invasion to England’s history of colonization demonstrates his critical eye toward his own country’s history of conquest, reminding readers that although humans are the protagonists of this novel, they too show a lack of respect for human life.



Wells’s first mention of the newspapers portrays them as slow and ineffective. This is important, considering that these papers are the primary form in which information is disseminated to the general public. As such, he quickly establishes the fact that Englanders are dependent upon a somewhat unreliable source for critical information, and that clear and effective communication is all too rare.



After the first flashes from Mars, the narrator's astronomer friend, Ogilvy, invites him to his observatory to view the anomaly. When the narrator looks through the telescope, he beholds a red flare of gas accompanied by a small "projection." In retrospect, the narrator notes that this projection is yet another missile rapidly making its way to earth, but in the moment, he knows nothing. With his knowledge of astronomy, Ogilvy hypothesizes about meteorites, brusquely discrediting any idea of life on Mars. "The chances against anything man-like on Mars are a million to one," he tells the narrator. Regardless, the flashes appear for ten nights, each one alighting at midnight. Eventually, the newspapers start mentioning these odd disturbances, but they mainly do so in a joking manner. One newspaper even references the extraterrestrial event in a political cartoon.

The narrator and his wife go for a walk one night during the string of Martian flashes. Underneath a crisp dome of stars, he explains the Signs of the Zodiac to her, singling out Mars, which is bright and magnificent in the sky. On their way home, the couple passes a group of merry-makers playing music and singing. They go on walking, passing houses with warm, inviting lights on inside. They hear trains gently rumbling in the distance. "It seemed so safe and tranquil," the narrator writes.

Ogilvy's conviction that life on Mars is highly unlikely shows how humans sometimes use science to avoid having to grapple with the unknown. Rather than considering the true implications of what he's seeing, he tries to explain the phenomenon away using the narrative to which he's grown accustomed. Of course, this is only natural, but the human tendency to cling tightly to our established understandings of things—even when that understanding is proved wrong—later works against the human race, blinding it to the reality of its situation.



Wells includes the narrator's pleasant walk with his wife in order to show a picture of an idyllic life on earth just prior to the Martian invasion. The faint sounds of human life surrounding the couple emphasize the complacency and comfort of life for these people—a life soon to be shattered not only by extreme violence, but by the realization that humans aren't entitled to the peaceful lives they have led at the top of the world's pecking order.



BOOK 1, CHAPTER 2: THE FALLING STAR

Early one morning, what seems to many to be "an ordinary falling star" streaks across the sky, leaving behind a glowing streak of green light. Ogilvy sees this and believes it to be a meteorite. Estimating that it landed in the common between Horsell, Ottershaw, and Woking, he rushes out of his house to find it. When he comes upon the object, he sees that it has made a massive hole in the earth and that it is a cylinder of some sort. The Thing, as the narrator calls it, is quite large and covered in a scaly substance that is too hot to touch or approach. From inside, Ogilvy can hear faint sounds, but he attributes them to the "unequal cooling" of the cylinder's surface.

Ogilvy's encounter with the fallen cylinder is the first time in The War of the Worlds that a character comes into direct contact with the unknown. Wells accentuates this by calling the cylinder "the Thing," a vague title that speaks to Ogilvy's inability to comprehend or contextualize the otherworldly object. What's more, by attributing the sounds coming from the Thing to "unequal cooling," Ogilvy again proves himself unwilling to entertain ideas that lie outside his established understanding of the world. Once more, he tries to use science to avoid acknowledging the unknown.



The only person in Horsell Common, Ogilvy studies the Thing. As it cools, its outer layer begins to flake off, and soon the oblong end sticking into the air starts to rotate. The cylinder, Ogilvy realizes, is unscrewing. “Good heavens!” he cries. “There’s a man in it—men in it! Half roasted to death! Trying to escape!” Finally, he remembers the flashes from Mars and immediately connects the two things in his mind. He rushes toward the Thing, excited by the idea that men might be inside, but is forced to stop because of the immense heat radiating from the cylinder. Turning, he climbs out of the cratered pit made by the Thing and runs toward Woking. On the way, he passes a wagoner, but when he tries to tell the man what he’s seen, he sounds beside himself and looks disheveled, having lost his hat in the pit. The wagoner drives on.

As he rushes on, Ogilvy encounters a bartender closing up his pub. Like the wagoner, though, the man thinks Ogilvy is crazy and even tries to lock him inside the taproom. Escaping, the astronomer finally finds a London journalist named Henderson, who agrees to accompany him back to the pit. When the two men arrive, the sounds from within the cylinder have stopped, but the top has screwed off enough so that a silver threading is visible, air rushing through the newly opened space. Henderson and Ogilvy approach, rapping against the Thing but receiving no response. They then rush back toward town, where Henderson sends a telegraph to London. “The newspaper articles had prepared men’s minds for the reception of the idea,” the narrator writes. He notes that by eight in the morning, a group of people have set out to see the “dead men from Mars.”

BOOK 1, CHAPTER 3: ON HORSELL COMMON

The narrator approaches the pit, joining a group of bystanders who want to catch a glimpse of the Thing. Nothing happens while they watch, though they eagerly wait for the top of the cylinder to continue unscrewing. At this point, the narrator is sure that the Thing is from Mars, but doesn’t think there are living beings inside. Still, he *does* believe there are “men in Mars,” despite what Ogilvy has told him about the improbability of this. He hopes that the Thing contains a “manuscript”—some sort of message from extraterrestrial beings—and muses about the “difficulties in translation that might arise.” After some time, he grows bored and walks home again, where he tries to work but finds himself distracted.

It’s significant that the wagoner refuses to listen to Ogilvy simply due to the astronomer’s excited temperament and disheveled appearance. The wagoner’s reluctance to pay attention to poor Ogilvy denotes the extent to which humanity—and perhaps especially British society in the late 19th century—values order and civility. Unfortunately, this preoccupation with appearances blinds people to the severity of their situation, and Wells shows that humans too often invest themselves in trivial matters instead of paying attention to the most pressing concerns.



Although the newspaper articles about the flashes from Mars were primarily written in jest, they succeeded in at least “prepar[ing] men’s minds” for the arrival of the Thing. This demonstrates the large impact newspapers have on the narrator’s society, which is clearly influenced by the media (even when the media fails to take its job seriously enough). The impact of such news organizations is worth remembering as The War of the Worlds progresses, as characters descend into chaos with the eventual loss of access to such sources of information.



In this scene, the narrator finds himself pulled between two states of mind: curiosity and boredom. His interest in the Thing and the possible challenges in communication is tempered by a desire to go about living his everyday life. In turn, Wells puts on display humankind’s tendency toward habit, as well as a certain kind of willful ignorance that takes hold of people like the narrator. However, the fact that the narrator is unable to work when he goes home suggests that he knows something significant has happened, and his curiosity draws him to the unknown, disrupting his daily life.



More and more people flock to Horsell Common. Newspapers in London print headlines reading, “A MESSAGE RECEIVED FROM MARS. REMARKABLE STORY FROM WOKING.” The narrator returns to the pit, where people are selling soft drinks and crowding around the edge. Ogilvy sees him and asks him to visit the lord of the manor to ask for permission to install a railing around the pit. The crowds, Ogilvy tells the narrator, are getting in the way of the small group of astronomers working to unscrew the top of the cylinder. He explains that every now and again sounds can be heard from within the Thing. The narrator departs to find the lord of the manor, but discovers that he is in London and is expected to return soon. As such, the narrator goes home, has tea, and walks to the train station to meet the lord.

It’s easy to see that newspapers immediately take advantage of the extraordinary situation, turning it into a sensational headline in order to sell more papers. Of course, the headline itself exaggerates the story, since no “message” has yet been transmitted or delivered from the Thing—except, perhaps, for the Thing itself. Once more, then, Wells shows the papers to be somewhat unreliable and prone to embellishment.



BOOK 1, CHAPTER 4: THE CYLINDER OPENS

The narrator returns to the pit at sundown to find hundreds of spectators in a commotion while the cylinder unscrews. As the crowd pushes back and forth, a man falls into the pit, and a humming sound emanates from the Thing. The cylinder’s lid falls to the ground with a heavy, metallic thud. The narrator sees “greyish, billowy movements” in the dark hollow of the cylinder as something with eyes like “two luminous discs” emerges, wriggling one tentacle and then another into the air, little appendages that look like grey snakes. The narrator feels a sudden chill, and a woman behind him screams. He starts forcing his way back through the crowd, all the while keeping his eyes trained on the cylinder behind him as more and more tentacles extend into the air.

Although the narrator—along with the crowd of spectators—first experiences intense curiosity regarding the cylinder and what emerges from its depths, his interest quickly turns to revulsion. In response to the horrific, inhuman appendages, he turns and runs away. As such, the unknown is cast as terrifying and repulsive, and the natural human reaction is to escape. This reaction also brings to mind the biological “fight or flight” response, a hardwired survival technique. In this way, the narrator’s response to seeing the first Martian illustrates both humankind’s inherent fear of the other and its first survival tactic.



As he tries to make his escape, the narrator continues to look at the Martian over his shoulder, noting its size (that of a bear), its flat eyes, and its strange mouth dripping with gooey saliva. The Martian quivers and pulses as it squeezes out of the cylinder. The narrator observes that the Martian’s features are “intense, inhuman, crippled and monstrous.” Recalling this initial glimpse, he writes, “Even at this first encounter, this first glimpse, I was overcome with disgust and dread.” Abruptly, the Martian drops from the top of the cylinder, vanishing from the narrator’s sight into the pit. Upon hitting the ground, it moans a “thick cry,” and yet another circular being appears in the cylinder’s hole.

Again, the narrator underlines the disgust and horror that come along with encountering the unknown. The Martian he sees is unlike anything he’s ever looked upon in his entire life. Because of this, he has no way to contextualize the alien’s physical features, and so his reaction is all the more pronounced. Nothing, it seems, could be more dreadful than something so utterly unknown.



The narrator breaks into a run and heads toward the nearest tree line. Although he tries to run as fast as possible, he finds himself unable to take his eyes off the pit, staring at the aliens over his shoulder as he sprints. Upon reaching the trees, he stops and looks back to see a “round, black object bobbing up and down on the edge of the pit.” This is the backlit silhouette of the man who fell in—his head rises as he tries to climb out, but suddenly he sinks down and vanishes completely, pulled back with a shriek. The narrator points out how strange the entire sight of Horsell Common would be to somebody unaware of the situation. He remarks upon the abandoned wheelbarrows used for selling soda and the “row of deserted vehicles with their horses feeding out of nose-bags or pawing at the ground.”

In this moment, the narrator highlights the disconnect between what's happening in the pit and the ordinary nature of life going on outside the pit. As the Martians kill their first human and the crowd scatters in fear, horses stand idly by, eating and busying themselves with ordinary activities. This compartmentalization of danger runs throughout the following chapters, when newspapers fail to accurately report the dire situation and people go on living their lives as if nothing significant has happened.



BOOK 1, CHAPTER 5: THE HEAT-RAY

The narrator remains in the woods, peering at the pit. “I was a battleground of fear and curiosity,” he writes. Unable to leave but equally unable to approach once more, he walks in circles, trying to catch glimpses of the aliens. Every now and again he sees tentacles fling through the air. He also sees a “thin rod” rise, “a circular disc that spun with a wobbling motion” attached to its top. Eventually, he sees a group of men approach the pit with a white flag, waving it back and forth. This small delegation (which includes Henderson and Ogilvy) wants to communicate with the Martians. As they come nearer, though, an intense flash of light and green smoke and flame issues from the pit, hissing and humming as it shoots the men, immediately incinerating them.

The narrator's indecision is the result of a mix of curiosity and repulsion, a combination of emotions that is quite common in the face of extraordinary or unfamiliar circumstances. The narrator's curiosity blossoms even as fear prevents him from going back to the pit. In this moment, then, readers witness how human intelligence and reason can both jeopardize a person and help him or her survive. As such, the mind is cast as both a dangerous thing and an instrument necessary to survival.



Horrorified, the narrator sees that this beam of fiery light is shooting all around, burning the heather and the trees and everything in its path. Then, as suddenly as it began, the hiss of the terrible flame cuts out, and the blackish object shooting them slowly lowers into the pit again. In the now “dark and unfamiliar” night, treetops smoke and houses in Woking are reduced to cinder. “The fear I felt was no rational fear,” the narrator writes, “but a panic terror not only of the Martians but of the dusk and stillness all about me.” Incredulous and terrified, he runs away without looking back.

The fact that the narrator suddenly feels his surroundings are “unfamiliar” suggests that his “panic terror” is the direct result of having encountered something utterly foreign and unknown. Because he's never felt this kind of fright before, he calls it “no rational fear.” At the same time, however, it's worth noting that his fear is in fact quite rational, since he's clearly in a very dangerous situation. Whether or not his fear is rational, there's no doubt that it helps him survive, since it propels him from the pit, thus ferrying him away from danger rather than allowing him to remain in harm's way.



BOOK 1, CHAPTER 6: THE HEAT-RAY IN THE CHOBHAM ROAD

The shops close in Woking after the Martians use the Heat-Ray, but this doesn't adequately reflect the attitude held by most people who haven't yet seen the aliens' fury. People seem to treat the event as an interesting topic of conversation, writes the narrator, not as a serious threat to their lives. In fact, many people in Woking don't even know the cylinder has opened, though before he died Henderson sent a messenger to report the news to a local paper. Along with another astronomer, Ogilvy himself also sent word (before dying) that a company of soldiers should report to the pit. Still, everything within range is destroyed, and the narrator estimates roughly forty people now lie in charred heaps. Of those who died, at least three were "crushed and trampled" by fellow humans.

Again, Wells examines the human tendency to pretend everything is normal even when extraordinary events have taken place. It seems many people have heard the news and have simply chosen to regard it as a novelty, an interesting tidbit of information to pass back and forth with the same kind of amusement the newspapers displayed in their cartoons about Mars's strange flashes days earlier. Above all, this portrays humans as a complacent and uncritical race that sees no need to put any effort whatsoever into protecting their own lives.



BOOK 1, CHAPTER 7: HOW I REACHED HOME

Running out of the woods, the narrator follows a road until he's exhausted, at which point he falls near a bridge and stays there for a long time. He eventually comes to his senses, realizing he's lost his hat and his collar. While he previously felt only terror, now he feels normal again, "a decent, ordinary citizen." He remarks that there is "no sensible transition from one state of mind to the other," and he can hardly say whether what he has witnessed actually happened. Picking himself up, he walks homeward and encounters a group of people in the street. When he tries to talk to them about the Martians, they brush him off, saying they've heard enough about the ordeal.

Interestingly enough, the narrator—who witnessed the Martians' fury first-hand—is able to transition from complete fear to a state of relative tranquility. He even tries to discount his own experience, clearly using wishful thinking to try to convince himself that what he saw can't possibly be real. This aligns with the general public's unwillingness to recognize the severity of the situation—an unwillingness that implies humans aren't ready to admit that their continued success and survival on earth can't be taken for granted.



Frustrated by the way the group of pedestrians responds to his comments about the Martians, the narrator stumbles into his home, where he immediately sits and drinks wine. He tells his wife over a dinner gone cold about the Martians, lamenting Ogilvy's death and talking about the horrifying creatures. Realizing this line of thinking will frighten her, he recants and comforts her by repeating everything Ogilvy believed about the Martians and their inability to live on earth. "In particular I laid stress on the gravitational difficulty," he writes. He explains to his wife that, since earth's gravity is three times stronger than Mars's gravity, the Martians won't be able to move very well on earth. He notes that this opinion is widely accepted, remarking that the *Times* and *Daily Telegraph* both report the same thing.

Once again, the narrator takes refuge in ignorance and naiveté, ignoring the dangers he himself witnessed and choosing instead to focus on what the newspapers incorrectly report. In other words, he actively goes out of his way to deceive not only his wife, but also himself. Of course, this is a psychological defense mechanism, and a rather feeble one at that, considering the fact that Ogilvy—the original person to propagate this optimistic notion about the Martians—has died at the hands of the very beasts he claimed should be (according to science) no better than useless slugs on earth.



The narrator admits in retrospect that he and the newspapers overlook two important factors when considering the Martians' ability to survive on earth. First, earth has more oxygen, which aids the Martians in maneuvering their newly heavy bodies. Second, nobody takes into account that the Martians are so intellectually and technologically advanced that they've devised tactics to move on earth without relying on muscles. Nonetheless, the narrator knows none of this as he sits at the dinner table with his wife, saying with unfounded confidence, "We will peck them to death tomorrow, my dear."

The narrator's assertion that the humans will "peck" the aliens to death the following day proves that he's approaching the matter as if it's nothing more than a standard military procedure. Indeed, this phrase sounds as if the narrator and his wife are discussing a simple battle between two countries. No matter how hard he tries to normalize the situation, though, there's no changing the fact that humans are outmatched by the superior Martians.



BOOK 1, CHAPTER 8: FRIDAY NIGHT

The next day, the narrator is awed by the way the "commonplace habits of the social order" have seamlessly merged with the horror and mystery of the Martians' arrival. In fact, it seems to him that very few people living more than five miles from the pit even change their daily routines to reflect the extraordinary events. "Many people had heard of the cylinder, of course," he writes, "and talked about it in their leisure, but it certainly did not make the sensation that an ultimatum to Germany would have done." The telegram Henderson sent to London doesn't even make it into print, since his newspaper thinks it's a joke and is unable to reach him to ask questions.

Although the narrator himself appears somewhat prone to ignoring the Martian invasion—opting to peacefully eat dinner and deny the strength of the Martians instead of preparing for battle or flight—he also appears cognizant of the fact that his fellow humans (those who make up "the social order") aren't paying sufficient attention to the catastrophe. The assertion that the Martians' arrival doesn't even "make the sensation that an ultimatum to Germany" would make further illustrates this point, hinting that Englanders are so preoccupied with their xenophobic fear of foreign countries that they fail to recognize a true invasive threat when it lands destructively in the middle of a field.



Every once in a while throughout Friday night, somebody approaches the Martians and never returns—a spot light sweeps out from the pit, finds trespassers, and ignites them with the Heat-Ray. From a distance, many people hear sounds like hammering come from the pit. These noises continue throughout the night while the odd tree or bush crackles with fire left over from the Heat-Ray. Eventually, two companies of soldiers arrive and line the perimeter of Horsell Common. And, to add to the growing tension, another projectile star falls from the sky mere seconds after midnight, landing in the woods north-west of Horsell Common.

Wells primarily uses this chapter to set the scene for the chaos to come, slowly erasing any doubts readers may have regarding the Martians' strength and prowess. Indeed, the aliens prove themselves to be unambiguously violent through the use of the Heat-Ray, and their mysterious all-night construction marks them as an industrious species, a group of orderly creatures intently preparing to overthrow humanity.



BOOK 1, CHAPTER 9: THE FIGHTING BEGINS

In the morning, the narrator speaks to the milkman, who laughs and says, “This lot’ll cost the insurance people a pretty penny before everything’s settled.” He goes on to inform the narrator that the woods are still on fire. When he leaves, the narrator walks toward Horsell Common, and on his way comes across a group of soldiers who ask him what the Martians look like. Despite their eager talk about “shelling” the aliens, it’s clear they know nothing about the situation. Later, the narrator fetches a newspaper, but is disappointed to learn nothing new. In the afternoon, gunfire can be heard coming from the Common.

That evening, the narrator has tea with his wife while the war rages on outside. Looking out the window, he sees trees burst into flames and the tops of buildings vanish entirely. The chimney of his house cracks, and he realizes the Heat-Ray has destroyed everything between his house and the Common. At this point, he resolves to leave with his wife, suggesting that they go to Leatherhead, where they have relatives. Hiding his wife along the road, he rushes off to the Spotted Dog, an inn owned by a man who possesses a horse and dogcart. The narrator offers the innkeeper two pounds to borrow both, promising to return them by midnight. Riding back to his wife, the narrator passes a soldier fleeing in the other direction, who tells him the Martians seem to be on the move. Collecting his wife, he sets off for Leatherhead.

BOOK 1, CHAPTER 10: IN THE STORM

The narrator drops his wife off in Leatherhead and turns back to return the horse and dogcart. Surprisingly, he’s more excited than scared, as he looks forward to returning to the center of the action. When he approaches Maybury Hill—upon which his house sits—it is dark, but there is a “lurid green glare” lighting the road, and a third cylinder lands nearby. At this point, the weather erupts into a thunderstorm. In flashes of lightning, the narrator sees a large object in the distance, “a monstrous tripod, higher than many houses, striding over the young pine-trees, and smashing them aside in its career.” This otherworldly machine towers above the landscape, and another appears next to it, this one seeming to charge right in the narrator’s direction. Startled, the narrator’s horse cuts hard to the right and topples to the ground.

The consequences of poor reporting and a deficit of information slowly become apparent when the soldiers reveal their ignorance. After all, these men are supposed to be the ones in control of the situation, but they know nothing about what has happened or what they’re up against. The fact that the narrator, who has only caught glimpses of the Martians, must fill in the people who have been sent to control the situation shows the extent to which the hierarchy of humankind is already beginning to crumble. Not only is humankind failing to communicate effectively, but it’s also failing to uphold its own social structures.



Within the space of a single evening, the narrator goes from calmly drinking tea to frantically running through burning streets in order to escape. In this way, Wells allows the strange everyday habits of England’s social order to sit alongside the harrowing new reality of the Martian invasion. But even amidst such chaos and danger, elements of normal order prevail, as is the case when the narrator pays the innkeeper to borrow his horse and dogcart, thereby upholding the dictates of society and its commitment to capital gain even in highly unusual circumstances that may very well render money useless.



The narrator’s excitement yet again reveals the dangerous side of human curiosity. Although returning to Woking is clearly an unwise thing to do, he finds himself willingly drawn to the calamity, perhaps a bit amused by the entire endeavor. In a way, he makes the Martian invasion into the same kind of “novelty” he references earlier when writing about the young people who, upon reading news of the Martians’ arrival, made light of the occurrence, treating it like nothing more than a titillating piece of news. In this moment, his curiosity reigns, unfortunately silencing one of his best survival tools: fear.



As the narrator lies in a small creek, the tripod lumbers by him. When it recedes into the distance, he remains on the ground before scrambling into a ditch and running toward his house. In the blackness, he collides with a man traveling in the opposite direction, who merely shrieks and continues on his way before the narrator can ask him questions about the Martians. At the top of a hill, he finds a dead body and realizes with a sickening feeling that it is the innkeeper, whose neck has been broken. Everything is dark except for intermittent flashes of lightning and the glow of flames coming from Horsell Common. Finally, the narrator reaches his home and collapses on the floor, putting his back to the door and shaking.

In the face of the Martians' awesome machinery—which confirms that these are highly advanced and capable creatures—human communication almost completely breaks down. Indeed, the man the narrator encounters on the road merely screams in his face, running away before the narrator can even attempt to gain information from him. In this way, humans short-circuit their own best chance at survival by striking out alone instead of banding together.



BOOK 1, CHAPTER 11: AT THE WINDOW

After wallowing on the floor, the narrator pours himself a glass of whiskey and goes upstairs to survey the decimated landscape from his study window. The Oriental College, which used to stand between his house and Horsell Common, has had its top blown off, and the narrator can see a “vivid red glare” around the pit. Against this light, black shadows of strange shapes move back and forth, working on something the narrator can’t identify. The narrator also sees a destroyed train on its tracks, pluming with flames and smoke. Studying the Martians’ large machines, he wonders how they’re operated—“did a Martian sit within each,” he writes, “ruling, directing, using, much as a man’s brain sits and rules in his body?”

The destruction of the Oriental College and the nearby train is symbolic of humanity’s collapsing infrastructure. The ruined college especially signifies the breakdown of the race, since it was once an institution where communication, knowledge, and innovation flourished. The gleaming fighting machines, on the other hand, represent the Martians’ power and dominance, their ability to quickly build an impressive empire that can force humanity into submission.



The narrator hears a sound below and sees a man walking through his garden. He whispers down to the man, who tells him he’s trying to hide. Letting this stranger inside, the narrator offers him whiskey and waits for him to calm down. Finally, the newcomer says that he’s an artilleryman who was momentarily separated from his regiment when his horse tripped and fell. Right at this moment, his fellow soldiers—who were trying to operate a large gun to shoot down the Martians in their fighting machines—were incinerated by a Heat-Ray. With his horse lying atop him, the artilleryman waited until it was safe to escape, at which point he made his way through ditches until finding himself in the narrator’s garden. Nobody else in Horsell Common, he says, seems to have survived this attack.

For the first time since speaking briefly to the milkman, the narrator gets a chance to obtain information from a fellow human. The report the artilleryman delivers is incredibly grim, but the narrator has at least gained a companion. Once again, readers see how ordinary customs carry on in times of fear and disaster, as the narrator cordially offers the artilleryman a glass of whiskey in his dining room. Whereas earlier in the novel the continuance of the “social order” seemed irresponsible and misguided, here such customs help the narrator and his new friend cope with the dreadful circumstances, buoying their spirits in a small but still significant way.



The narrator serves the artilleryman mutton and bread, which they share in the darkness for fear of attracting the Martians by lighting a lamp. They then go upstairs to the narrator's study and survey the charred land before them. "Never before in the history of warfare had destruction been so indiscriminate and so universal," the narrator remembers. Worse, the pit seems to have grown even bigger, and a vaporous green substance billows into the air above it.

Although the narrator and artilleryman feel more at ease after having found one another, there's no doubt the situation outside is worsening. Furthermore, that the destruction wrought by the Martians is "indiscriminate" is especially harrowing, since it makes it even harder for the narrator to understand or contextualize what the aliens are trying to achieve. Unlike an invading army from a foreign country, which would target specific sites, the Martians appear bent on bringing about complete destruction.



BOOK 1, CHAPTER 12: WHAT I SAW OF THE DESTRUCTION OF WEYBRIDGE AND SHEPPERTON

In the morning, the narrator and the artilleryman set out together, traveling north in order to avoid the third cylinder, which lies between Woking and Leatherhead. In their travels, they pass a group of cavalry soldiers who tell them to travel to Weybridge so that the artilleryman can report to a military official. On their way, they come upon another group of soldiers, this one with hidden guns pointed toward Woking. In Byfleet, they see that the soldiers are having a difficult time convincing residents to flee the area. "Do you know what's over there?" the narrator says to one man who seems particularly hesitant to leave behind his possessions. The man tries to explain that his belongings are valuable, but the narrator cuts him off, yelling, "Death! Death is coming! Death!"

The narrator's eruption at the man wanting to stay with his possessions marks the first time that he shows that he fully understands the gravity of the current situation. No longer is he somebody who will doubt the Martians—now he knows that the creatures bring nothing but "death," and he tries to spread this news. Unfortunately, others are unprepared to hear such messages, perhaps because they're reluctant to accept this reality. In this way, the narrator himself takes on the job the newspapers should be doing, taking it upon himself to spread whatever information he can in order to help others survive.



Upon reaching Weybridge, the narrator and artilleryman can't find the military headquarters amidst the chaos of confused pedestrians and eager traffic. Moving on, they try to cross the Thames River—a difficult endeavor, since there aren't enough boats to ferry everybody across. At that moment, a "muffled thud" sounds in the distance, and then the narrator hears gunfire. At once, four Martian machines arrive, destroying everything in their path. Aware of the Heat-Ray, the narrator instructs everybody to jump into the water. Just as the nearest machine is about to use its Heat-Ray, one of the large guns operated by soldiers finally hits its target, smashing the hood of the machine and sending it whirling down. In its descent, it decimates a church before falling into the river.

Again, the narrator uses what little knowledge he possesses to help others, quickly spreading his idea to jump in the water to avoid the Heat-Ray. On another note, the fact that the dying Martian topples over a church on its way down is highly symbolic; in this moment, Wells suggests that even if humans are able to defeat the Martians, life on earth as they know it will still be damaged greatly, perhaps beyond repair.



When the fighting machine hits the water, the Heat-Ray sends massive quantities of steam into the air and creates an enormous wave of blisteringly hot water. The other three Martian machines approach, and the narrator dives deep underwater. When he emerges for air, he sees that the fighting machines have crowded around their fallen comrade. People take this opportunity to get out of the river and run into the woods, but one of the machines smites them with its Heat-Ray, which swoops across the river and creates another large wave. In the scalding water, the narrator rushes to the bank and falls down, where he lies incapacitated and exposed, expecting “nothing but death.” He vaguely remembers a Martian machine walking right by his head as it carries—along with the other two machines—its fallen comrade. Then all is quiet, and he realizes he has survived.

If the destroyed fighting machine is to be read as symbolic, then the aftermath of its death is also significant. Indeed, when it falls into the water, it sends up an enormous wave of hot water that no doubt kills many humans. As such, Wells implies that humans will be hard-pressed to survive battles with the Martians, since even just one alien death results in so many earthly casualties.



BOOK 1, CHAPTER 13: HOW I FELL IN WITH THE CURATE

Each night, a new cylinder arrives. The Martians spend their time in the afternoons bringing items from new cylinders to their base in Horsell Common, where they work late at night under clouds of green smoke. Meanwhile, the narrator makes his way toward London. On his way, he finds an abandoned boat and paddles it with his hands through deserted towns. “It is a curious thing,” he writes, “that I felt angry with my wife; I cannot account for it, but my impotent desire to reach Leatherhead worried me excessively.”

Throughout The War of the Worlds, the narrator is a rather flat character. Most of his emotions tend to center around horror, disgust, and—occasionally—relief. Although his desire to find his wife is ostensibly his driving force, survival most often seems to be his main concern. However, in this moment he shows a strange emotional fluctuation that complicates his inner world—he admits to feeling angry at his wife. This is perhaps because he resents having to constantly worry about her safety—after all, he needs to focus all his attention on his own survival, so any energy expended thinking about his wife only puts him in greater danger.



After beaching his boat in Middlesex, the narrator drifts out of consciousness, finally opening his eyes again to behold a curate sitting across from him. This man is hysterically lamenting humanity’s situation, saying, “Why are these things permitted? What sins have we done? [...] All our work undone, all the work—What are these Martians?” The narrator has little tolerance for such complaints, eventually barking, “Be a man! You are scared out of your wits! What good is religion if it collapses under calamity? Think of what earthquakes and floods, wars and volcanoes, have done before to men! Did you think God had exempted Weybridge? He is not an insurance agent, man.” As the two men speak, they begin to hear gunshots. In response, they jump up and run away together.

The narrator normalizes the catastrophe, trying to lend the curate some perspective on the situation even though the circumstances are indeed quite dire. Nonetheless, it’s true that that humankind has braved all sorts of disasters (“earthquakes and floods, wars and volcanoes”), and there’s no reason why the Martian invasion shouldn’t be seen as a similar obstacle to overcome. Religion, he argues, is supposed to give humans the faith they need to withstand hardship, but the curate seems to think otherwise, believing his religious devotion should render him exempt from pain and sorrow. The narrator naturally rejects this notion, arguing that nobody is “exempt” from this sort of calamity.



BOOK 1, CHAPTER 14: IN LONDON

At this point, the narrator describes his brother's experience of the Martian invasion. His brother is a medical student living in London and doesn't even hear about the aliens' arrival until Saturday morning, long after the narrator himself first came into contact with the violent beings. When the papers finally circulate in London on Saturday, they include a "brief and vaguely worded telegram" that is "all the more striking for its brevity." The message reports that the Martians—frightened by crowds of people—killed a group of men with a "quick-firing gun." The article ends by saying, "Formidable as they seem to be, the Martians have not moved from the pit into which they have fallen, and, indeed, seem incapable of doing so. Probably this is due to the relative strength of the earth's gravitational energy." The narrator adds, "On that last text the leader-writers expanded very comfortably."

Later that day, two other newspapers report that all communication with Woking has ceased. The narrator's brother decides that, merely because he's curious, he'll visit the narrator, wanting to see the Martians before they're killed. When he tries to take a train to Woking, though, he's told there's been an accident on the tracks preventing all travel. Still, nobody in London is overly concerned, and the narrator points out that it isn't until Monday morning that the true panic sets in, since most Londoners don't read newspapers on Sundays.

The narrative that the Martians are "sluggish" and unable to move with ease prevails in London because none of the newspapers have access to eye-witness accounts of the deadly creatures. In the morning, the narrator's brother goes to church at a nearby Foundling Hospital, where the service vaguely references the Martian invasion. After saying a "prayer for peace," he leaves the church and, reading a newspaper that somewhat disturbs him, he again goes to the train station, where he learns that hordes of people are traveling into London from the outskirts of the city. The station slowly descends into chaos and alarm, and when the narrator's brother finally leaves, he picks up yet another newspaper. The tone of this paper is much more dire; "Dreadful catastrophe!" reads the headline. "Fighting at Weybridge! Full description! Repulse of the Martians! London in Danger!" Aghast, the brother pays threepence for the paper.

By shifting the narrative to his brother's experience, the narrator is able to demonstrate just how slowly and inaccurately information about the Martians travels. Indeed, readers once again encounter the false notion that Martians can hardly move because of earth's gravity. Once again, those who read this news take solace in its optimistic report, reveling in the idea that there are confident "leader-writers" among them who will "comfortingly" explain that the general public has nothing to fear. At this point, readers understand that this kind of misinformation is quite dangerous, since it completely disarms Londoners and puts them off their guard.



Much like the narrator himself, the narrator's brother shows himself to be overly curious. Rather than displaying an appropriate amount of fear regarding the Martians, he wants to travel to Woking in order to catch a glimpse of the otherworldly creatures. In this case, fear isn't what stops him—as it is with the narrator—but rather the destruction of railways, a fact that should (but doesn't) alert him and his fellow city-dwellers to the seriousness of the situation.



When the London newspapers finally catch up to reality, they portray it in a sensationalist manner. Rather than responsibly spreading the news regarding the dangerous Martians, the papers publish alarmist headlines clearly written to make money. Because like most people he wants to remain up-to-date, the narrator's brother quickly pays threepence for a copy of this paper. Considering the fact that destruction is imminent—the paper even says that London is in danger—the newspaper should be affordable, since the importance of money pales in comparison to the importance of spreading information about approaching danger. Nonetheless, the newspaper proprietors cling greedily to their profit-making scheme, sowing panic for profit and ignoring their responsibility to warn all of London's citizens—not just those who can afford to buy the paper.



Finally, the narrator's brother begins to comprehend "something of the full power and terror of these monsters," learning at last that they aren't "sluggish" and that they command "vast spider-like machines, nearly a hundred feet high," and that they are fast, and have guns that shoot beams of "intense heat." Nonetheless, the paper retains an optimistic tone, referencing the single fighting machine felled by military guns in the Thames. The article ends with "reiterated assurances of the safety of London and the ability of the authorities to cope with the difficulty."

London grows frantic as refugees stream into the city. The narrator's brother moves between the groups of people, hoping to hear news about Woking to determine the safety of his brother. Later in the evening, he hears gunshots coming from south London, and something like sheet lightning plays across the sky. That night he's awoken by bells and commotion in the street. "They are coming!" he hears a policeman scream. "The Martians are coming!" Once outside, he hears people shouting "Black Smoke!" He finds a newspaper vendor and buys yet another paper, which informs him: "The Martians are able to discharge enormous clouds of a black and poisonous vapour by means of rockets. They have smothered our batteries, destroyed Richmond, Kingston, and Wimbledon, and are advancing slowly towards London, destroying everything on the way. It is impossible to stop them" and the only hope for survival is to flee immediately.

BOOK 1, CHAPTER 15: WHAT HAD HAPPENED IN SURREY

Fighting rages through Sunday night and into Monday morning as human forces try to keep the Martians away from London. The narrator and the curate witness this fighting and hide in a ditch. The narrator wonders what the Martians understand about human life, pondering whether the creatures want to exterminate the entire race. He adds that "at that time no one knew what food they needed." When quiet falls again, the narrator and curate emerge from the ditch to see that the fighting machines have discharged canisters of the deadly Black Smoke. The narrator explains how the dense smoke curls over the land, killing everything in its way until the Martians walk by and clear the air by shooting a jet of steam on the strange vapor. The dispersion of the deadly substance utterly defeats all military opposition. Amidst this commotion, a fourth cylinder falls from the sky.

Despite the newspapers' sensationalist headlines, the articles are still full of misinformation and unwarranted optimism. The faith the writers of these papers put in the "authorities" just goes to show how eager they are to believe in the strength of the power structures under which they've lived their entire lives. Blatantly unwilling to admit that the "social order" is in the process of collapsing, the newspapers strike a bizarre balance of sensationalism and optimism—neither of which helps Londoners prepare for danger.



By the time the newspapers finally accurately report the situation, it's too late: it's already time to evacuate the city. Nonetheless, it's worth noting that the narrator's brother would know next to nothing about these circumstances if he didn't buy so many newspapers. Indeed, he consults no less than five newspapers in this single chapter, the last of which he acquires in the middle of a city-wide frenzy. As such, Wells shows that, though newspapers are often flawed in the way they spread information, they're ultimately important when it comes to keeping the public at least somewhat cognizant of pressing issues.



As the Black Smoke creeps over the land, it's difficult not to think how quickly the Martians have dominated England. Like the smoke itself, they spread throughout the country, effortlessly subordinating their human foes. They force people like the narrator and the curate into ditches, making them hide like small, frightened animals. What's more, this isn't even the first ditch the narrator has had to seek refuge in, and even the artilleryman—trained in combat and bravery—cowered from the fighting machines in a lowly ditch. As such, it's evident the Martians have usurped humanity's high position in the animal kingdom, forcing them to new lows.



BOOK 1, CHAPTER 16: THE EXODUS FROM LONDON

In the panic that strikes London, even the police force is useless, “losing shape and efficiency, guttering, softening, running at last in that swift liquefaction of the social body.” With no trains running, the narrator’s brother finds a bicycle shop that has been broken into by looters. Obtaining a bike, he rides out of London until the front tire—punctured from the outset—can go no farther. On a chaotic road in the city’s outskirts, he strikes out on foot, stopping at an inn for some food and rest. Setting out again, he sees two women getting robbed in their small carriage. He hastens over and fights the three attackers until they retreat. One of the women gives him a revolver, and he joins them in their carriage, learning that they are sisters-in-law: Mrs. Elphinstone and Miss Elphinstone.

Mrs. Elphinstone and Miss Elphinstone tell the narrator’s brother their story. Returning late from an urgent medical case, Mrs. Elphinstone’s husband—a doctor—heard about the Martians and prepared the two women for escape, promising to catch up with them on the road and giving them a pistol. Though he claimed he’d meet up with them around 4:30 in the morning, he still hasn’t arrived, and it is almost 9 o’clock. Though Mrs. Elphinstone is hesitant, the narrator and Miss Elphinstone convince her to keep moving, and the three resolve to travel together. The women give the narrator’s brother the revolver, since he tells them he’s an expert gun-handler in order to quell their nerves, though he’s never actually used a pistol. Forging on, the threesome decide to combine the money they have to buy passage out of the country on a boat.

The narrator’s brother, along with Mrs. Elphinstone and Miss Elphinstone, encounter a mass of people traveling in the opposite direction. The town they’re headed toward, they realize, is alight in flames. Instead of turning around, though, the narrator’s brother slowly inches forward, “irresistibly attracted” to the extraordinary scene. He sees carriages and cabs and people on foot streaming away, one cart even splattered in “fresh blood.” Injured citizens limp by, yelling, “They are coming.” One man tries to make his getaway while hauling a bag that breaks and spills a large quantity of coins into the road. Despite the commotion, the man falls to his knees and starts scooping up the coins. Finally, a carriage rolls over him and breaks his back, but still he tries to collect his money. When the narrator’s brother tries to pull him up, the man bites his wrist until he lets go.

By showing how fellow humans turn against one another in this time of strife—despite the fact that they should be banding together and uniting against their common enemy, the Martians—Wells tangibly demonstrates the “swift liquefaction of the social body.” Whereas before many people were still standing on custom and living their ordinary lives, now the social order has fully disintegrated, leaving each person to fend for him- or herself. Indeed, this is something of a “survival of the fittest” scenario, a fact that aligns with Wells’s interest in Darwin’s theory of evolution.



The narrator’s brother’s decision to lie about his experience with guns is ultimately an attempt to give his companions a sense of order and control, presenting them with a falsehood that will perhaps comfort them. That said, the decision is also a foolish one with possibly sexist connotations, since it’s entirely possible that one of the women actually has had experience using guns. Regardless, it’s obvious they hope they won’t have to use the weapon, instead resolving to flee the country, thereby opting for flight in the decision between “fight or flight.”



The man collecting the coins is a perfect example of somebody who fails to comprehend what’s really important in this moment of catastrophe. Indeed, he still believes in the value of things that no longer carry any importance, stupidly pawing at money on the ground even though doing so is both pointless and dangerous. The fact that he bites the narrator’s brother’s wrist further accentuates his crazed and desperate mentality, proving that he’s willing to turn against others in order to go keep hold of the things he still believes are valuable.



Finally, after an extended struggle against other travelers—in which Miss Elphinstone is forced to point a gun at a cart that is preventing them from moving in the opposite direction—the narrator’s brother and his two companions break free of the crowd, moving east until they reach a safe resting place.

The turmoil these travelers must endure accentuates humanity’s disarray. That Miss Elphinstone must hold a fellow human at gunpoint shows that the Martians are not only a threat to humanity’s physical wellbeing, but also to its social health, pitting humans against one another in their fight for survival.



BOOK 1, CHAPTER 17: THE “THUNDER CHILD”

Regarding the tumultuous flight out of London, the narrator writes, “Never before in the history of the world had such a mass of human beings moved and suffered together.” He notes that the Martians could easily decimate everybody in their path, but that they seem less interested in total “extermination” and more interested in the “complete demoralization and the destruction of any opposition.” Still, the narrator’s brother learns on Tuesday that the Martians have now fully occupied London, and cylinders continue to fall. In their travels, the brother, Miss Elphinstone, and Mrs. Elphinstone enter Chelmsford, where a band of people calling themselves the Committee of Public Supply confiscate their pony as food, telling them they can share it with the rest of the town on the following day.

Although the Martian attack has clearly pitted humans against one another—as evidenced by the previous chapter’s antics in the road—it’s true that, in a different sense, it has brought humanity together, since everybody suffers the same catastrophe. Nonetheless, while some people try to run rampant and free, happy to dispense with the social order, others try to enforce new kinds of systems and hierarchies, like the Committee of Public Supply. Unfortunately for the narrator’s brother and his two companions, both kinds of people (criminals and law-abiders alike) end up harming them or standing in their way.



Finally, the narrator’s brother and the Elphinstones reach the ocean. The harbor is crowded with many boats, and a large ironclad—an armored naval ship called the *Thunder Child*—can be seen several miles off the coast. Further off in the distance, an entire fleet of fighting ships is at the ready. Unfortunately, Mrs. Elphinstone starts to panic upon seeing the ocean, suggesting that they turn around and go back home, where it has always been “well and safe” and where they’ll surely find her husband. After much convincing, the narrator’s brother and Miss Elphinstone coax Mrs. Elphinstone down to the beach and onto a steamboat.

Mrs. Elphinstone’s belief that she should return home shows how strongly people believe in the safety of routine and habit. Because her home has always been “well and safe,” she assumes it will remain that way even under Martian dominion. This viewpoint amounts to a vehement rejection of reality. Faced with such total change, Mrs. Elphinstone ceases to approach the situation with reason, instead trying to retrieve her old life by way of wishful thinking.



As the steamboat moves out of the harbor, a Martian fighting machine appears in the distance, accompanied shortly thereafter by a second. Together, the Martians wade into the water while the *Thunder Child* charges toward them, cutting swiftly through the wake with its low hull and sharp bow. A third Martian joins the brigade, but the fighting machines seem almost perplexed—perhaps even fearful—of the *Thunder Child*, which goes on advancing at full speed. One of the Martians shoots a canister of Black Smoke at the ironclad, but it merely bounces off her portside and drops into the ocean. One Martian steps back and shoots the Heat-Ray, but it doesn’t do much to stop the *Thunder Child*, which shoots the fighting machine until the large Martian stumbles into the water, sending up a spray of steam and flame.

At last, the Martian fighting machines seem to have met their match. Because ocean travel and maritime trading have been in practice since the early days of humankind, marine technology is arguably more advanced than any other kind of human invention in Victorian England. The ironclad, then, is humanity’s most sophisticated and colossal weapon against the otherwise far-superior fighting machines. As such, the Martians are for the first time the ones who must face the unknown as they look confusedly down at this impressive piece of weaponry.



Though on fire, the *Thunder Child* charges on, flaming through the water until one of the other Martians shoots its Heat-Ray at it. The *Thunder Child* bursts fully into flame but is able to keep on advancing until finally colliding with the great alien beast, sending it reeling into the water. At this point, the steamboat upon which the narrator's brother stands has successfully escaped and is out of sight of the *Thunder Child*'s battle with the third Martian. With the sunset in their eyes, the passengers try to see through the smoke and steam as they listen to rapid gunfire. Just before the sun falls fully beneath the horizon, the narrator's brother sees an object rise suddenly into the sky—"something flat and broad and very large" that moves in a "vast curve" before shrinking into the distance.

It's significant that the narrator's brother only gets to witness part of the Thunder Child's battle with the Martians. Indeed, Wells is aware of how effective it is to keep his characters—and his readers—in a state of partial ignorance about the Martians and their power. In keeping with this, he tempers the Thunder Child's success by obscuring the final outcome of the battle. And just when the narrator's brother might feel as if he can relax and safely travel away, he spots the mysterious "flat and broad" object sail through the air, adding to the sense that the battle—and certainly the war at large—is far from having concluded.



BOOK 2, CHAPTER 1: UNDER FOOT

While the narrator's brother escapes England, the narrator himself has remained with the curate, camping out in an abandoned house for two days to avoid the Black Smoke. In hiding, he can't keep his mind off his wife, thinking she must assume he's dead. Meanwhile, the curate grates on his nerves so much that he tries to avoid the annoying man, moving from one room to the next until finally locking himself in the attic to be alone. At last, a Martian comes along on Monday afternoon and nullifies the Black Smoke with a blast of steam. Once the coast is clear, the narrator and the curate creep outside, only to find that an invasive **red weed** has grown across the land.

While his brother and the rest of humanity must contend with the Martians out in the open, the narrator is forced to deal with the pesky curate. In a way, this annoying man becomes almost as much of a nemesis to the narrator as the Martians are, a fact that once again illustrates how the aliens' presence often pits humans against one another. If the narrator met the curate under other circumstances, it's unlikely he'd dislike him so much, since the curate would be less prone to wailing about his hopelessness. As it stands, the Martian invasion has brought out the curate's worst side, and the narrator must remain with him even though they harbor vastly different ideas about religion, the unknown, and survival.



The narrator decides to leave the abandoned house. At first, the curate disagrees, arguing that they should stay because it's safe in the house, but he eventually relents when he sees that the narrator has no reservations about leaving him behind. Together they set out, passing dead bodies strewn across the roads and fires raging through the woods. At one point, a Martian fighting machine appears within a hundred yards, chasing a group of people. They hide in a shed until the machine passes, and then venture out again (though, once more, the curate is reluctant). Upon leaving, they quickly see another Martian pursuing a small group of humans, which it doesn't incinerate—rather, it scoops them up and places them in a "great metallic carrier." The narrator notes that this is the first time he intuits the Martians "might have any other purpose than destruction."

The realization that the Martians "might have any other purpose than destruction" is deeply unsettling, since the narrator has already come to terms with the idea that these aliens want only to ruin everything in their path. That they could have plans in store for humanity and earth is alarming because it confirms both their intelligence and their commitment to their task. Furthermore, the thought of them planning something only adds to their mysterious quality, emphasizing the terrible fact that humans have no idea what the future holds.



The narrator and the curate hide yet again in a ditch. Eventually they rise and continue until the curate feels weak, at which point they go into a house to look for food and water. The first house they try has nothing valuable, but the second has a pantry stocked with food. The pantry is connected to a kitchen and a cupboard. While the two men stay up late eating, another cylinder crashes to earth. This time, though, it lands nearly on top of them, destroying a portion of the house and rendering it impossible for them to leave. When the narrator wakes up after having passed out, the curate tells him to be quiet because there is a group of Martians just outside the house. Together they huddle in the kitchen, scared to even breathe. After a long time, the narrator sneaks into the pantry and starts eating, and the curate follows behind.

Although the narrator gravely dislikes the curate, the annoying man does—in this scene at least—help him survive the arrival of the most recent Martian cylinder. When the narrator wakes up after having passed out, the curate quickly tells him to be quiet, alerting him to the dangers just outside the house. In this way, Wells casts companionship as useful when it comes to survival, even if that same companionship presents various interpersonal hardships.



BOOK 2, CHAPTER 2: WHAT WE SAW FROM THE RUINED HOUSE

The narrator finishes eating and goes back to the kitchen, where he listens to a thudding vibration made by the Martians outside. The curate has also reentered the kitchen and is now looking through a small triangular hole in the wall. The narrator scrambles over and replaces the curate at the hole, through which he sees a large pit—much like the one in Horsell Common—and puffs of green vapor. A fighting machine stands motionless above, its cockpit empty. The narrator also sees a new machine, a kind of “handling machine” with many legs—like a mechanical spider—all working with amazing dexterity, such that it seems to be a “crab-like creature” with a Martian operating it, “the equivalent of the crab’s cerebral portion.”

In this moment, the narrator likens the Martians to the “cerebral portion” of a crab, thereby offhandedly suggesting that the aliens have perhaps evolved so much that their bodies aren’t, in fact, actually bodies; rather, it seems in this scene, their bodies are brains capable of controlling intricate machines of their own making.



The narrator digresses to describe the Martians’ anatomy in greater detail, explaining that they have large circular bodies resembling heads. Each body has a face with huge dark eyes, no nose, and a “fleshy beak.” On the back of the body there is a “tight tympanic surface” that acts as a large eardrum. Around the mouth, sixteen tentacles wriggle about as hands—the narrator notes that the Martians seem to want to raise themselves onto these hands but are unable to do so because of earth’s strong gravity. Inside, he continues, the body is primarily taken up by a brain with “enormous nerves” connected to the eyes, ear, and tentacles. The heart, for its part, is seemingly quite strained by the earth’s atmosphere. Notably, the Martians have no digestive system. “They were heads,” writes the narrator, “merely heads.”

The narrator’s description of the Martians’ anatomy further confirms his previous allusion to the fact that their bodies have been streamlined via evolution to prioritize only the most vital organ—the brain. Of course, this highly efficient body has developed in response to Mars’s atmosphere, which is why the heart and tentacles seem so ineffective to the narrator. Whereas these body parts would work perfectly well on Mars, earth’s strong gravity takes its toll on them and renders them less efficient. By including this, Wells ultimately makes a case for the theory of evolution and natural selection, which upholds that living organisms adapt over time in direct response to their specific environments.



Expanding upon his description of the Martians, the narrator explains that the creatures don't need a digestive system because they don't eat food, but rather inject blood into their veins. "The physiological advantages of the practice of injection are undeniable," writes the narrator, "if one thinks of the tremendous waste of human time and energy occasioned by eating and the digestive process." He adds that the human body wastes a great amount of energy and time digesting food. Furthermore, he mentions that, though this process of sucking blood out of living victims seems repulsive, one should consider what humans' "carnivorous habits" might seem like to "an intelligent rabbit."

The narrator notes that a "certain speculative writer of quasi-scientific repute" once wrote (before the Martians arrived) that humans could conceivably evolve to a point at which they dispense with bodies and limbs in favor of "mechanical appliances." This writer also pointed out that human anatomy might one day do without digestion and that "such organs as hair, external nose, teeth, ears, and chin" might no longer remain "essential parts of the human being, and that the tendency of natural selection" could carry humanity to this advanced stage, where "the brain alone" would be "a cardinal necessity." Commenting on this, the narrator admits to believing that the Martians may have descended from beings similar to humans. Concluding his summary of the Martian body, the narrator adds a final detail: micro-organisms don't exist on Mars.

BOOK 2, CHAPTER 3: THE DAYS OF IMPRISONMENT

When a second fighting machine arrives at the pit outside, the narrator and the curate take refuge in the pantry. For two weeks, they huddle in hiding, eating food and crowding around the peephole to behold the Martians and their strange behavior. During this time, the curate grates on the narrator. Trapped with this insufferable man prone to "helpless exclamation," the narrator feels like he's going to go crazy. The curate, for his part, weeps for hours on end and overeats, far exceeding his share of the rations and putting the two men in danger of running out of food. Slowly but surely, he becomes depressed and begins to act without concern for safety. The narrator notes, "He was one of those weak creatures, void of pride, timorous, anemic, hateful souls, full of shifty cunning, who face neither God nor man, who face not even themselves."

Again, the narrator (and, in turn, Wells) emphasizes the efficiency of Martian anatomy, once more showing how the process of evolution can eventually lead to incredibly advanced beings. In addition, he demonstrates his ability to retain a certain amount of perspective when it comes to judging the Martians for their alien practices. By urging humans to consider what their "carnivorous habits" would seem like to "an intelligent rabbit," he reminds readers that, in the end, the Martians' feeding ritual is nothing more or less grotesque than human's hunger for flesh.



The "speculative writer" the narrator references here is, in fact, H.G. Wells, who actually wrote a piece called "The Man of the Year Million" that humorously suggests humans will one day evolve into beings quite similar to the Martians he describes in this section. That the narrator thinks the Martians may have descended from beings not unlike humans shows once again how powerful and transformative he believes the process of evolution to be.



The narrator's belief that the curate can't even face himself, let alone God, perfectly illustrates how spineless he thinks his companion is. In turn, it becomes painfully clear that the curate is unfit for survival, especially since he's apparently unable to grasp the concept of rationing food. To be sure, he's weak and miserable, a person who cowers in the face of the unknown. That Wells chooses to portray the worst of humanity in the form of a religious figure is perhaps a critique of the ways in which religious institutions have historically been resistant to progress, whether scientific or social.



Outside, the Martians establish a base in the new pit. Three fighting machines now lurk on the premises, and several handling-machines move about completing various tasks. One night, the narrator hears the Martians extract blood from a human until the poor man is drained and lifeless. This terrifying event leaves the curate “robbed of all vestiges of reason or forethought.” On the third day, the narrator witnesses a Martian feeding ritual, an experience that causes him to abandon any plans of trying to escape.

The fact that the Martians’ feeding ritual strips the curate “of all vestiges of reason or forethought” once again confirms the notion that he’s feeble and useless. By saying that the curate is “robbed” of “reason,” the narrator implies that fear makes the man unable even to think logically. As such, the curate becomes a rather dangerous companion, since the two men must act rationally and secretly if they’re going to stay alive.



BOOK 2, CHAPTER 4: THE DEATH OF THE CURATE

On the sixth day of their confinement, the narrator finds the curate drinking wine in the kitchen. After wrestling with him, the bottle breaks against the floor. The narrator stands perfectly still, waiting, and when nothing happens, he goes to the pantry and divides the remaining food into rations, firmly telling the curate that he can’t overeat or overdrink anymore. The curate is incensed, but the narrator stands between him and the food, forcing a standoff that lasts throughout the night. In the coming days, the curate psychologically unravels, whimpering for food. On the eighth day, he gives up whispering and dares to speak at full volume. “It is just, O God!” he repeats. “It is just. On me and mine be the punishment laid. We have sinned, we have fallen short.”

The curate’s audacity in this moment aligns with the narrator’s previous suggestion that fear has robbed the man of all reason. Food, it seems, is the only thing left that the curate cares about, and when the narrator takes it away, he has no reason to keep quiet. After all, he has lost all “forethought,” meaning that he no longer considers the consequences of his actions. This is why he speaks so loudly, invoking God and inviting punishment.



As time wears on, the curate verbally assaults the narrator, pleading loudly for food and threatening to shout to the Martians. When the narrator tells him to be still, he yells, “I have been still too long, and now I must bear my witness. Woe unto this unfaithful city! Woe! [...] to the inhabitants of the earth by reason of the other voices of the trumpet—” He jumps to his feet goes into the kitchen, saying, “I must bear my witness! I go! It has already been too long delayed.” The narrator finds a heavy knife and clubs the curate over the head with its handle, knocking him unconscious. Unfortunately, he’s too late, and a Martian handling-machine appears in the triangular hole of the kitchen wall.

When the curate goes into the kitchen shouting about how he must “bear witness,” it becomes clear that he has worked himself into some twisted delusion of martyrdom in which he will face the Martians and “bear witness,” as if they are somehow representative of God’s wrath. He even curses “this unfaithful city,” suggesting that anybody who doesn’t “bear witness” is a sinner. The narrator—a rationalist—thinks this is nonsense and tries to save the curate (and himself) by clubbing him over the head.



The narrator fumbles over to the pantry as a Martian tentacle worms into the kitchen. Opening a coal-cellar door, he hides in the darkness and hears the Martian moving about the kitchen. Soon the sound of the curate’s body being dragged across the floor is audible. In the cellar, the narrator burrows into a pile of coal. Several moments later, the cellar doorknob clinks, and the narrator realizes the Martians have discovered how to open doors. A tentacle twists into the cellar, sliding over the coal pile, searching for the narrator’s body. The slimy appendage brushes against his boot, then grips a block of coal and retracts, leaving the narrator alone once more. For an entire day, he stays in the cellar without moving. Finally, on the eleventh day of his confinement, he exits the cellar.

The Martian does two interesting things in this scene. First, it opens the door using its tentacle, which implies that the aliens have a growing body of knowledge regarding human life and the way it operates in the physical world. Second, the Martian takes a piece of coal with it, a fact that suggests the creatures are still actively researching their new environment. This last idea is especially important to remember, as the Martians’ compatibility with earth’s atmosphere figures into the coming chapters.



BOOK 2, CHAPTER 5: THE STILLNESS

When he emerges, the narrator discovers the Martian has taken all the food from the pantry. For the next several days, he languishes in thirst and hunger, occasionally running the sink even though the water is black. He discovers that the hole in the kitchen wall has been overgrown by **the red weed** that has accompanied the Martians and spread over the earth. On the fifteenth day, a dog comes into the house and promptly leaves. After hearing the dog walk peacefully away in the garden, the narrator summons the courage to pull back the red weed, and he sees that the pit has been emptied—no Martians or machines are in sight. Venturing outside, the narrator stands on a mound and surveys the land, which has been completely engulfed by the red weed.

That the Martian takes the remainder of the food on its way out of the pantry is significant because it suggests that it knows the narrator is somewhere in the cellar and that he'll eventually need to eat. This once again proves that the Martians are capable of elaborate cognition and forethought. On another note, the rapid spread of the red weed mirrors the Martians' quick ascent to power—in the same way that the Martians almost immediately dominate the animal kingdom, the red weed also easily takes dominion over earth's vegetative ecosystem.



BOOK 2, CHAPTER 6: THE WORK OF FIFTEEN DAYS

Still standing on the mound, the narrator takes stock of his surroundings, feeling that he's studying the landscape of another planet entirely. "For that moment," he writes, "I touched an emotion beyond the common range of men, yet one that the poor brutes we dominate know only too well. I felt as a rabbit might feel returning to his burrow, and suddenly confronted by the work of a dozen busy navvies digging the foundations of a house." He characterizes this as a feeling of "dethronement," a hint that humankind is no longer the "master" of earth.

Wells confirms here that The War of the Worlds is a story about the rearrangement of earth's pecking order. By using the word "dethronement," the narrator implies that humans have long been the rulers of the animal kingdom. Now, though, the Martians have forced humankind into submission, and the narrator finally understands what "poor brutes" like "rabbit[s]" and other animals have experienced during the reign of man.



Focusing on his hunger, the narrator moves toward a garden, sometimes wading neck-deep through thick patches of **the red weed**. He eventually finds onions and, later, mushrooms. By a stream, he notices that the red weed becomes even more magnificent when it encounters water, flourishing rapidly and with "tropical exuberance." He notes now—in retrospect—that the red weed eventually succumbs to "a cankering disease, due, it is believed, to the action of certain bacteria." Elaborating, he writes: "Now, by the action of natural selection, all terrestrial plants have acquired a resisting power against bacterial diseases—they never succumb without a severe struggle, but the red weed rotted like a thing already dead."

Although the red weed succeeds in spreading far and wide, the narrator highlights the fact that it's unfit for earth's environment. Like the Martians themselves, whose bodies are advanced but less effective on earth than on Mars, the red weed has developed "by the action of natural selection" according to its own atmosphere. Because Mars has no bacteria, then, the red weed hasn't built up a tolerance for micro-organisms. By explaining this, Wells clearly lays out the simple science behind Darwin's theory of evolution. This is ultimately significant because many readers in the late 19th century were skeptical of Darwin's theory.



Moving on through the ravaged woods and countryside—passing through abandoned towns—the narrator is troubled by the utter silence of the land, thinking that the entirety of human life has been “swept out of existence.” He wonders if the Martians have perhaps moved to some other city—Berlin or Paris—to find new food, since they’ve clearly exhausted all forms of sustenance in England.

When the narrator turns his mind to where the Martians have gone, he ultimately considers the notion of scarcity. Indeed, the aliens seem to have depleted England’s resources in the same way that they’ve depleted their own planet’s resources. With this thought comes the idea that the Martians are on a never-ending journey to find an environment that can sustain them. While this is an important element of survival, their inability to efficiently garner their resources implies a certain lack of foresight in the struggle for longevity.



BOOK 2, CHAPTER 7: THE MAN ON PUTNEY HILL

The narrator spends a restless night at an abandoned inn atop Putney Hill, unable to stop thinking about the curate’s death. He turns to God, praying that, if she is dead, his wife died a swift and painless death. Upon rising in the morning, he goes outside and finds a man dressed in rags hiding behind a thicket of bushes. “Stop!” yells this man, approaching. He brusquely explains to the narrator that there’s no food in the area, saying, “This is my country,” and all the food in the area is for him and him alone. When the narrator says he’s trying to go to Leatherhead to find his wife, the renegade is astonished, and the narrator realizes that the man standing before him is the artilleryman he traveled with before meeting the curate.

The artilleryman’s first words to the narrator in this scene are indicative of his overall cutthroat attitude toward survival. Rather than rejoicing in having found another living person, he tries to send the narrator away, claiming that the entire area is off-limits. In this way, the artilleryman is highly territorial and hell-bent on preserving his own means of survival. This competitive mindset is yet another example of how humans often turn against one another in the midst of the Martian invasion, completely focusing on fending for themselves.



The artilleryman fills the narrator in on what’s happened in the past two weeks, explaining that the Martians have gone to London, where they’ve set up a larger encampment. He even dares to say that they’ve invented a flying machine. The narrator is astounded by this, saying, “It is all over with humanity. If they can do that they will simply go round the world.” Although this depresses the narrator, the artilleryman appears unperturbed, taking pleasure in saying, “We’re beat” and, “it’s all over.” He insists that humanity’s struggle against the Martians was never even a war, since humans are mere ants when compared to these unstoppable creatures.

There exists an odd form of optimism in the artilleryman’s outlook, as if it’s a relief to finally give up on humanity. Taking pleasure in this defeatist attitude, he seems unmoored from society—almost happily so, as if humankind’s rule was a burden rather than a privilege. Unlike his fellow humans, the artilleryman has no qualms about embracing the unknown life that lies ahead of the race. The fact that he feels this way implies that he has perhaps always had problems with human society, though what exactly these problems are is not yet clear.



“What will they do with us?” the narrator asks the artilleryman, who tells the narrator that he has thought a great deal about this question. He explains that he has observed people’s reactions to the Martian invasion, and remarks that “most of the people were hard at it squealing and exciting themselves.” He asserts that “it’s the man that keeps on thinking [who] comes through.” Assuring the narrator that he has thought it out, he goes on to explain his theory: that humanity has grown soft, has become accustomed to superfluous luxuries that obscure the importance and hard work of survival. The artilleryman believes the Martians will take over the earth, eventually enslaving humans in cages. Many of the most spineless and bourgeois humans will simply accept this fate. Others, like the artilleryman himself, will go on living “for the sake of the breed.”

The artilleryman’s plan is to live underground in a network of tunnels that connect to London’s sewer and subway systems. “The risk,” he tells the narrator, “is that we who keep wild will go savage—degenerate into a sort of big, savage rat...” He plans to form a group of “able-bodied, clean-minded men,” resolving to banish “weaklings” from the posse with the aim of avoiding such a fate. Saving the human race, though, is not the only objective. Rather, the artilleryman points out that they must preserve and advance human knowledge. The narrator, he says, will come in handy because he’s an intellectual. The underground human race will educate and improve until it understands how to match the Martians’ technology. At this point, they will be able to sneak into the fighting machines and finally resist the aliens.

The artilleryman is so convincing in his vision of humanity’s way forward that the narrator follows him back to an abandoned house, where the artilleryman has been digging in the basement. The idea is to dig until they intersect the sewers. Together they work all day, and the narrator ponders the plan, finding many logistical problems in it now that he has time to fully reflect. One misgiving he has, for instance, is that instead of blindly digging a tunnel from this house, they could simply go into the underground system from a manhole and then dig back to the house. The artilleryman suggests that they take a break after a while, saying that one can’t always work. Taking a break on the roof, the artilleryman reviews his “grandiose plans,” making it clear that he wants to be the one to steal a Martian fighting machine.

In this section, the artilleryman outlines his critique of humanity, saying that the race has become complacent and that England’s posh society has gone astray. In a sense, he seems to be saying that humans have been evolving in the wrong direction; rather than growing stronger, they’ve been getting weaker and more comfortable, which will only lead to more weakness. It becomes evident that the artilleryman is actually deeply invested in the fate of humankind, as he insists that the race is intrinsically worth saving, even if only “for the sake of the breed.” The artilleryman, then, is determined to use what powers he possesses—chiefly the capacity to “think,” he says—to set the human race back on track to evolve and advance.



The artilleryman’s zealous plan to save the human race indulges a line of thinking known as Social Darwinism, a scientifically disproven theory that humans can influence the process of natural selection by selectively breeding a race of “able-bodied” people with strong genes and desirable traits. An offshoot of Darwin’s ideas, this theory is often used to promote racist and bigoted ideas. Wells uses the artilleryman to explore this concept, and though the eager man often expresses ideas about survival that ring true to the narrator, his low estimation of humankind and its ability to survive without resorting to this sort of debasement suggests that Wells himself condemns this kind of thinking.



When the narrator realizes that the artilleryman has suggested an inefficient way of digging tunnels, readers begin to see that there are most likely other flaws in this elaborate plan. For somebody so obsessed with only allowing the smartest, most competent people into his inner circle of survivors, the artilleryman suddenly seems a bit lacking in intelligence. Furthermore, he isn’t even a hard worker, which is troubling considering how much he talks about needing strong people devoted to the cause of survival. When he reveals his desire to drive the Martian fighting machine, it’s clear that his eager attitude comes from a place of vanity, not will and devotion.



Going downstairs, neither the narrator nor the artilleryman want to resume work, so they eat a meal instead, and the artilleryman urges the narrator to play cards. They play many games and then have another meal accompanied by cigars and champagne, which the artilleryman finishes. The narrator leaves the drunk artilleryman downstairs and goes to the roof. Staring across the fiery landscape and the glowing sky, he sees **the red weed** glowing purple in the night, and this awakens his “sense of wonder” and understanding of “the proportion of things.” Suddenly he’s ashamed of having indulged the artilleryman’s rhetoric, feeling like a “traitor” to his wife and to all humankind. With this realization, he decides to “leave this strange undisciplined dreamer of great things to his drink and gluttony,” resolving to go to London, where he thinks he’ll be able to better discern what his “fellow-men” are doing.

If the artilleryman had a “sense of wonder” like the narrator, he would likely not be so pessimistic about the human race. The fact that the narrator refers to him as an “undisciplined dreamer” given to “gluttony” confirms the fact that Wells disapproves of the twisted logic set forth in theories of Social Darwinism. Rather than promoting pessimistic ideas about survival, then, the narrator indulges a more hopeful, healthier conception of humanity’s continued existence—one based upon a “sense of wonder” at the marvel of life, even when that marvel is challenged by something vast, foreign, and unknown.



BOOK 2, CHAPTER 8: DEAD LONDON

On his way into London, the narrator passes a drunk man slumped amidst a patch of **red weed**. When he tries to gain information from this man, the drunkard only curses at him and lunges to attack. Moving on, the narrator walks through London, where the streets are “horribly quiet.” Some houses burn, and dead bodies are strewn about the sidewalks, caked in the Black Powder. Some sections of the city have remained untouched by the Black Smoke, but many of the shops have been looted by humans. In South Kensington—near Hyde Park—the narrator hears a strange undulation, a “superhuman note” vacillating through the air: “Ulla, ulla, ulla, ulla.” He follows the sound, which takes “possession” of him, all the while wondering why he—of all people—has been spared.

Once again, communication and the dissemination of information fails the narrator, as the drunkard not only proves himself unable to hold a conversation, but also responds with hostility to the narrator’s questions. This leaves the narrator utterly alone in an eerily empty city scarred by Martian destruction and human opportunism alike. His loneliness is emphasized by the otherworldly sound echoing throughout the streets, a haunting note that reminds him that—though he’s walking through his home country—he’s venturing into the unknown.



Finding an empty pub, the narrator has a drink and something to eat. When he exits, he finally sees the Martian fighting machine that has been making the noise—it’s standing motionless at the end of a street, and the narrator ventures toward it, suddenly void of all fear. Upon reaching the Martian, he stands there and watches, but the creature does nothing—it just goes on wailing. Moving onward, he passes a dog running in the street with a “piece of putrescent red meat” hanging out of its mouth. He then comes upon a destroyed handling-machine—the machine from which the dog pulled its meat. As the narrator continues walking, the haunting ululation falls haltingly silent.

In this moment, the narrator is abandoned by both humans and Martians, left to construct his own narrative about what has happened. In the absence of newspapers, human communication, or firsthand knowledge, he finds himself in the lonely position of having to piece together what has happened.



In the small hours of dawn, the narrator walks up a hill and looks over the city. He sees another Martian fighting machine standing still. Sick of waiting, he decides to end things once and for all, and resolves to speed along his inevitable death by walking directly toward this Martian. As he advances, though, the sun lifts, and in the sky he sees a collection of crows flying around and landing on the fighting machine's hood. Feeling fearless, he draws nearer and beholds a piece of **the red weed** hanging from where the Martian sits dead in its cockpit. Looking around, he comprehends that the Martians have died, "slain by the putrefactive and disease bacteria against which their systems were unprepared; slain as the red weed was being slain; slain, after all man's devices had failed, by the humblest things that God, in his wisdom, has put upon this earth."

The narrator explains again that Mars has no bacteria, thereby rendering the Martians defenseless against the "germs of disease [that] have taken toll of humanity since the beginning of things." Humans, on the other hand, have undergone a long process of natural selection that has resulted in a certain "resisting-power" against destructive micro-organisms. The narrator notes that, even while the Martians were so efficiently destroying humanity, they were already doomed by infection. Surveying the mess, the narrator sees the flying-machine the Martians had been constructing at the time of their death. Rejoicing, he views London from his high vantage point, overwhelmed by the thought that humanity will continue. "In a year, thought I," he writes, "—in a year..." Then, all at once, his mind turns to his wife, and to his old life of "hope and tender helpfulness," which has "ceased forever."

BOOK 2, CHAPTER 9: WRECKAGE

After realizing the Martians have died, the narrator doesn't have any memory of the next three days. Nonetheless, he learns from others that he was collected by a group of wanderers and taken to a hut for shelter, where the wanderers sent a telegraph to Paris announcing the news of the Martians' death. All of Europe rejoiced, and people started streaming back into London. While this was happening, though, the narrator was in a state of near insanity, apparently chanting, "The Last Man Left Alive! Hurrah! The Last Man Left Alive!" Taking pity, the people who found him nursed him back to health. When he finally comes to his sense, his caretakers tell him that Leatherhead was destroyed by a Martian fighting machine. After four days of recovery, he leaves for home.

Yet again, the theory of evolution and natural selection comes to the forefront of The War of the Worlds, this time as the narrator identifies earthly bacteria as the novel's hero. The pure simplicity of how the Martians are defeated makes the artilleryman's elaborate plans look all the more ridiculous and farfetched; humans only needed to wait for the Martians to fall prey to infection, a menace that humankind itself has struggled with for centuries and, through the process of natural selection, triumphed over.



Upon understanding that the Martians have died, the narrator's relief quickly turns into something more complicated, for the life he used to know and love will never again be the same. Indeed, the Martians' arrival has rocked humanity to its core, and there's essentially no way to move forward in the same direction as before. In a way, this notion aligns with the artilleryman's desire to change the course of human existence—the life of "hope and tender helpfulness" has "ceased forever" because humans will no longer be able to complacently take survival for granted.



The narrator's dissociation is perhaps the result of his realization that he has once again entered into the realm of the unknown, though this time the nature of the unknown is different. Whereas before he was forced to accept the new unknown reality of Martians on earth, now he must come to terms with the unsteady world they've left behind. To make things worse, he believes he's the "last man left alive," so he detaches from reality in order to distance himself from his own loneliness and destitution.



On his way to Woking, the narrator buys a newspaper. Although most of the pages are blank, the back page is full of advertisements. The only article inside confirms the existence of a flying machine, but is otherwise uninformative. Upon reaching Woking, the narrator sees the horse and dogcart he borrowed from the innkeeper—they are engulfed in the decayed **red weed**, the bones of the horse white against the daylight. He then searches for the innkeeper, who he discovers has been properly buried. At this point, he ventures home, where the door and windows are open. He goes upstairs to his study, where he finds a piece of writing he had been working on—"In about two hundred years," the first sentence reads, "we may expect—" The sentence terminates here, and the narrator goes downstairs to the dining-room.

Once in the dining room, the narrator hears a voice issuing from behind him: "It's no use," it says. "The house is deserted. No one has been here these ten days. Do not stay here to torment yourself. No one escaped but you." Turning around, the narrator looks out the open window, through which he sees his cousin and his wife. "I came," she says. "I knew—knew—" The scene ends just as the narrator reaches out to catch her from fainting.

The fragmented sentence the narrator finds written on his desk suggests that the future is entirely unknowable; never in his life would the narrator have guessed Martians would come to earth, rule for a short period, and then swiftly die, leaving humans to piece together a new existence in the aftermath. At the same time, the open-ended nature of the sentence expresses a certain hopefulness, suggesting that the narrator is perhaps now better able to hope for a brighter future after having experienced such hardship. In this moment, disaster seems to breed self-reflection and reevaluation, a process that stands to benefit humankind.



The narrator's story ends melodramatically, husband and wife reunited. Somehow both partners have managed to survive, but this is undoubtedly one of the novel's least significant plot points in terms of thematic importance. Although the narrator's goal throughout the novel is to find his wife, each chapter focuses more on survival in general than it does on the particulars of his romantic life. Nonetheless, the narrator's wife gives him a reason beyond plain survival to make it through the Martian occupation alive, and so this scene ultimately renders his efforts worthwhile.



BOOK 2, CHAPTER 10: THE EPILOGUE

The narrator admits to feeling regretful that he can't help settle the many questions swirling in the aftermath of the Martians' stay on earth. Nonetheless, he explains that none of the Martians' bodies, upon inspection after their death, contained any bacteria other than the kinds one finds on earth. "That they did not bury any of their dead," he writes, "and the reckless slaughter they perpetrated, point also to an entire ignorance of the putrefactive process." Shifting his attention away from the many questions about the aliens' anatomy and capabilities, the narrator focuses on the "possibility of another attack," a topic he doesn't think the general public takes seriously enough. He proposes that, since humans now know the position of the Martians' launching gun, the planet should be monitored so that defensive measures can be taken if they once more send cylinders hurtling toward earth.

Once again, the narrator highlights how important it is to remember that the process of natural selection unfolds in response to a being's immediate environment. The Martians didn't take this into account when planning their journey to earth, and it cost them dearly. Although they seem to have understood the difficulties they would face with regard to oxygen and gravity, they ignored—or perhaps didn't know about—the prevalence on earth of micro-organisms. If they'd paid closer attention to such evolutionary nuances, it's likely they would have successfully dominated earth and the entire human race.



The narrator insists that humans can no longer “regard this planet as being fenced in and a secure abiding-place for Man.” At the same time, he adds that there is, in fact, a silver lining to the Martian attack, since the invasion has “robbed [humanity] of that serene confidence in the future which is the most fruitful source of decadence.” He also mentions “the gifts to human science” brought on by the Martians’ attack. Above all, he champions “the broadening of men’s views,” which has opened doors for innovation. When the earth is no longer inhabitable, he points out, humankind now knows that interplanetary travel is possible. More importantly, the attack has made him appreciate what he has. He now finds a strange new dimension of joy when he holds his wife’s hand after having thought she was dead.

“The broadening of men’s views” benefits humankind because it encourages people to explore ideas otherwise deemed implausible. In this regard, readers might recall the way the wagoner easily dismissed Ogilvy on account of his disheveled appearance and seemingly crazy news about “men from Mars.” Close-mindedness constantly interferes with humanity’s ability to survive. Nobody was willing to treat the threat of the Martians as valid until it was already too late. Now, the narrator points out, people won’t make the same mistake.





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