

H. G. WELLS:

LITERARY ARCHETYPES IN NON-CANONICAL LITERATURE

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Ever since classical times criticism has tended to distinguish between "high" and "low" forms of literature. In ancient Greece hierarchy in genres reflected hierarchies in society: epic and tragedy were considered "high" or elevated genres because their protagonists were people of high "degree" or social rank, whereas comedy and satire were "low" because they used less elevated characters. Different criteria established by literary theory have always made critics, academics and institutions carry out the grading of literary genres and the selection of literary from non literary, creating the canonical corpuses of literary works.

For many years, science fiction has been considered a "low" form of literature. It seems that one of the principles upon which this decision has been based has to do with "realism" in literature; that is to say, good stories should directly reflect experience of what happens or has happened in our world. Most escapist fiction then is not considered seriously and tends to be labelled as popular or just light entertainment. It is quite illustrative to see that the definition of the novel given by the *Oxford English Literature* (vol. VII) excludes all science fiction stories, since representations of future life are not taken into account:

Marginal Discourse. (Eds. M. Aguirre, M. Bengoechea, R.K. Shepherd), Servicio de Publicaciones, Universidad de Alcalá de Henares, Alcalá 1993.

A fictitious prose narrative or tale of considerable length - now usually one long enough to fill one or more volumes -, in which characters and actions representative of the real life of past or present times are portrayed in a plot of more or less complexity.

Moreover, if we look at the list of fiction writers who have been awarded the Nobel Prize for literature, the vast majority of them are linked with the realist and naturalist traditions.

A clear example of a marginal science fiction writer is H. G. Wells, one of the first and most famous writers of this genre in English literature. He enjoys an international reputation and his work has been translated into nearly every language in the world. However, the stories that established his fame as a writer are usually considered to stand outside the bounds of the standard literary canon. Of all his large production of nearly fifty novels, scholarly discussion has centred almost entirely on a few autobiographical and social novels of character and humour, such as *Love and Mr. Lewisham*, *Kipps*, *Tono-Bungay* and *The History of Mr Polly*. As far as his scientific and supernatural romances are concerned, literary criticism has usually discussed Wells's ideas rather than his aesthetic qualitites.

Before the arrival of films, radio and television, the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th represent the first phase of modern mass communication and mass entertainment in Britain. As a result of the Education Act of 1870, which made elementary education compulsory and universal, a large and unsophisticated reading public emerges, the so-called 'lowbrows', and soon after that a mass of 'popular' literature is produced for them. Wells's scientific romances are part of this type of literature, whereas the novels of other writers - Thomas Hardy, Joseph Conrad, D. H. Lawrence, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf - were directed at a more reduced audience untouched by the general

"vulgarity", and with more sophisticated tastes, the "highbrows".

Therefore, Wells has usually been considered a popular entertainer rather than a serious artist. Let it suffice to say that his name is not included in some of the most prestigious anthologies of English literature such as those published by Norton or Oxford University Press, anthologies whose selections of literary works "make possible a study in depth of the diverse achievements by the major English writers in prose and verse, in the context of the chief literary types and traditions of each age."¹ He is also absent from some histories of English literature, like *Historia de la literatura inglesa*², *La literatura inglesa en los textos*³, or even *The New Pelican Guide to English Literature*⁴. In the general introduction to the seventh volume of the latter we read that they want to deal with "the major writers" of the first half of the twentieth century. H. G. Wells, however, is not discussed here as a writer of scientific romances and fantastic fiction. The only statement we find in the whole book about this type of stories is the following:

...in the best of the scientific romances and short stories, like *The Time Machine* (1895) and *The Country of the Blind* (1911) he attains the stature of a literary artist of a minor but decidedly original kind.⁵

The term "original" is often used to describe Wells's work; however, other words that might relate him with more serious writing are generally missing in scholarly criticism.

The main aim of this paper is therefore to discuss the 'canonicity' of this famous, marginal author, questioning the distinctions between what is generally considered as 'high' and 'popular' culture and pointing to some disconcerting similarities between the two. Attention should be paid then to some literary archetypes⁶ and conventions that appear in Wells's scientific romances⁷ and are also recurrent in so-called canonical literature. If H. G. Wells

is to be introduced in academic discussions as a writer of literary value, it should not be mainly in terms of his originality. The use of archetypes in the characters, settings and plots of his scientific romances connects him with previous literary traditions which have a good reputation among scholars.

To examine Wells's use of archetypes we shall focus our attention to his first scientific romance, *The Time Machine* (1895), a very well-known story in which a scientist invents a machine that can travel through time and journeys to the year 802701; in that world he first meets beautiful small happy people called the Eloi and he interprets them as descendants of a perfect sophisticated society; but then he learns that these human beings are being used just as food for another type of hideous and ferocious creatures, the Morlocks, that live in underground passages and caves.

The protagonist is the typical hero of a romance, a hero whose actions are marvellous but who could still be identified as a human being, a hero who "moves in a world in which the ordinary laws of nature are slightly suspended."⁸ In *The Time Machine* we do not find enchanted weapons, talking animals, terrifying ogres and witches, and talismans of miraculous power, as we do in the traditional romances; now it is science and technical progress which violate the rule of probability. Like the archetypical hero of a romance, the Time Traveller goes through different incredible adventures and eventually survives and returns home. Typically his success comes from an energy which is partly in him (his own merit and his bravery) and partly outside himself, I refer to such received features as noble birth, great strength, or a destiny given by an oracle, which are substituted in this case by the scientific knowledge that allows him to build his time machine.

Wells does not create here a complex personality, but a 'type' whose name we do not even know and who is referred to all the time as the Time Traveller. Here Wells follows an ancient tradition of naming characters according to some

distinguishing feature, instead of giving them ordinary Christian names and surnames. Like most of his characters, this one is a Wellsian self-projection expressing his ideas and worries.

He appears as the archetype of a traveller in search of new worlds, in search of answers to his questions about the human race. The only difference is that in this romance the travelling is not through space, but thorough time. An early draft of this story was first printed in 1888 in the magazine *Science Schools Journal* with the title "The Chronic Argonauts". This shows clearly that Wells, at the time of writing his story, was thinking of Jason, the hero of the Greek legend who led the Argonauts in the quest of the golden fleece. The Time Traveller thus joins the large tradition of protagonists of marvellous voyages, heroes who are questing spirits trying to achieve a seemingly impossible objective, in this case the aim being knowledge about the future.

Man's wish to learn something about the future, to obtain at least a partial knowledge of it, is very often reflected in literary texts. Literature is full of apparitions, oracles, visions, prophecies, predictions, dreams, and other premonitory signs sent by supernatural powers to give information about what is to come. In *The Time Machine* there are no supernatural powers, but a scientific artefact which helps man to discover the everlasting mystery of the earth's fate and the destiny of our race. The whole story becomes a new prophecy then and the Time Traveller a kind of modern prophet.

When the Traveller first arrives in the new world of the Eloi he thinks he has discovered a sort of paradise, a wonderful garden, full of splendid palaces, magnificent ruins, abundant foliage, silver rivers, and beautiful little people living in ease and security. This place is described as the Arcadia of the future, a social paradise, the home of pastoral simplicity and happiness, the golden age of human evolution. Hesiod, one of the earliest Greek poets, depicts

a very similar place in his epic *Works and Days* (ca. 800 BC), a similar Golden Age where men live happily and do not have to work because the eternal spring provides them with everything they need. This dream picture of an idyllic Arcadia appears again and again as an archetype in literary works of all ages: Virgil in his *Eclogues* (42-37 BC), Sir Philip Sidney in his *Arcadia* (1590), William Shakespeare in *As You Like It* (1600), John Milton in *Paradise Lost* (1667), to mention just a few.

But this pastoral stage of the human evolution also resembles an equalitarian Communist society in which people are all alike and live together in communal buildings; a community in which there are no signs of proprietary rights and no differences between the sexes or social classes. In short, he is describing another version of the much discussed ideal or imaginary commonwealth usually called Utopia. The utopian tradition dates from the fifth century before Christ when the greatest representative of ancient Greek comedy Aristophanes, in his play *The Bird*, sketched a Utopian city in the air trying thus to highlight the corruption of imperial Athens. The Eloi seem at first to live in the city of heaven called New Jerusalem and foretold in the Apocalypse, or in other similar places which are described in many literary works, like Plato's *Republic*, St. Augustine's *City of God*, Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), Tommaso Campanella's *City of the Sun* (1623), Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis* (1627), Samuel Butler's *Erewhon* (1872), or William Morris's *News from Nowhere* (1890).

Utopian literature has always been used as a way of promoting ethical teaching within a pleasing framework. These types of texts are satiric allegories which present the author's opinions about the defects of his contemporary society. Science fiction novels are sometimes connected with the utopian tradition since they present imaginary communities as allegorical media for the introduction of the author's ideas. This can be seen in *The Time Machine*, where H. G. Wells's political and social concerns are expressed.

Here he discusses Darwin's theories of Evolution, Socialism, Capitalism, differences of class and sex, the dangers and opportunities that human beings might soon see owing to technology and scientific advances.

Together with the social paradise of the Eloi, the Time Traveller also discovers the underworld of the Morlocks, naked and hairy creatures who are compared to apes, rats and spiders, who live in underground tunnels and come out at night to feed on the Eloi. At one point in the story, the Time Traveller descends into the dark and dangerous subterranean realm of the Morlocks because he thinks that there he can find an answer to the uncertainties of the future world. This journey resembles the archetypal journey to Hell, the dwelling place of the damned, a deep abyss in the lower world where the evil spirits live excluded from the light. Men have often imagined journeys to Hell in order to find information about the other world and the last destiny of man, the very same reason why the Time Traveller goes down. At this point, some mythological figures of the classical tradition come into our minds:

- Psyche came down to Hades as one of the difficult tasks Venus imposed upon her⁹.
- One of the twelve famous labours that Eurystheus imposed upon Heracles was the fetching up from the lower world of the triple-headed dog Cerberus, guardian of its gates.
- Ulysses, the hero of Homer's epic poem the *Odyssey*, visited the Land of Departed Spirits and learned from the Theban seer Tiresias how he could expiate Poseidon's wrath.
- Aeneas, the protagonist of Virgil's masterpiece the *Aeneid*, learns about the future of his race in his descent to Avernus.

Bernard Bergonzi has also suggested that this journey is similar to the Harrowing of Hell by Christ¹⁰. Whatever the

case, the archetype of the descent to Hell appears again and again in different fashions in many literary works. Dante's *The Divine Comedy* is one of the most distinct examples, though there are many others in English literature as well: John Lydgate's *The Pilgrimage of Man* (1440), Alexander Pope's *The Rape of the Lock* (1714) or William Beckford's *Vathek* (1786).

The Eloi and the Morlocks, the New Jerusalem and Hell, are there to symbolize a contrast between two worlds, like heroes and villains in medieval romances. And, according to traditional rules, their names also have special significance. Michael Draper¹¹ suggests a possible interpretation. He thinks that Murlocks recalls a name that appears in the Bible¹², Moloch, a false god to which Israelite children were sacrificed, and therefore that this name is related to any kind of influence which could demand from us the sacrifice of what we hold most dear. On the other hand, Eloi means god in Hebrew and appears in the New Testament¹³ when Jesus Christ cried out on the Cross: "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani" (My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?). Their names are obviously symbolic and convey meaning about the nature of these two types of people. And names are not the only symbolic elements in the story; there are plenty of images of light and darkness, the symbol of the Sphynx, the derelict museum, etc.

This is a story that Wells worked hard at, he rewrote it six times in seven years before it was published. It is a story which makes us see the author as a man with a vivid imagination who creates fantastic and, at the same time, credible worlds, an admirable storyteller who knows how to keep the reader's attention throughout, a master of simple and concise style, and a clear representative of the spirit of his age who does not use his stories as a mere source of entertainment, but as a medium for social comment.

Above all, he is a writer who illustrates wonderfully certain literary archetypes which convert some of his romances into something more than just light entertainment.

As Graham Greene made the thriller a serious literary form, so H. G. Wells, the true founding father of modern science fiction in English, made the scientific romance something of value. If all wars gain poetic resonance by being associated with the Trojan War, I hope that this discussion of literary archetypes that associate Wells's work with the classical tradition has been of some use to give this author the literary reputation he deserves.

It is obvious that the distinction between 'low' and 'high' should be made in terms of aesthetic and artistic values, instead of literary genres. In any given literary form we might find good and bad works. That means that not all science fiction should be considered inherently vulgar and therefore be put aside in academic syllabi and discussions.

It is true that now there are attempts to enlarge and reorder the standard canon so as to include some cultural products which some time ago were called 'popular' and 'lowbrow', such as the best-seller, literature written by women, or the writings of ethnic minorities. It is also true that nowadays science fiction is better considered than it was a few years ago, and that there exist some scholarly works on this genre and on some individual science fiction writers¹⁴. However, it is still necessary to make some academics remember names such as H. G. Wells. It is my hope that the present paper will assist in the process of re-evaluating Wells and demonstrate that his place among the important writers of English literature should be secure.

NOTES

1. M. H. Abrams (ed.), "Preface to the Fifth Edition", *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, London, W. W. Norton and Company, 1986, p. xxxix.
2. Cándido Pérez Gállego (ed.), *Historia de la literatura inglesa*, Madrid, Taurus, 1988.

3. Pilar Hidalgo and Enrique Alcaraz, *La literatura inglesa en los textos*, Madrid, Editorial Alhambra, 1981.
4. Boris Ford (ed.), "General Introduction", *The New Pelican Guide to English Literature* (Vol VII) From James to Eliot, Hammondsorth, Penguin Books, 1983, p. 8.
5. R. C. Churchill, "The Comedy of Ideas: Cross - Currents in Fiction and Drama", *The New Pelican Guide to English Literature*, op. cit., p. 228.
6. In modern literary criticism 'archetype' means a recurring or repeating unit or pattern which indicates that a literary text is following a certain convention or working in a certain genre. This term owes its importance to the fact that in literature everything is new and unique from one point of view, and to the reappearance of what has always been there, from another. For a detailed criticism of archetypal criticism see, for example, Northop Frye, *The Anatomy of Criticism*, Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press, 1957.
7. His other marginal stories with the supernatural as their subject matter are beyond the scope of our work.
8. See Northop Frye, op. cit., p. 33.
9. The fullest version of the tale "Cupid and Psyche" is told by the Latin author Apuleius in his *Metamorphoses* (*The Golden Ass*).
10. *The Early H. G. Wells*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1961, pp. 52-53.
11. *H. G. Wells*, London, Macmillan, 1979, p. 37.
12. See Kings xxiii, 10.
13. See Mark xv, 34.
14. See Brian Adams, *Billion Year Spree*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1973; Peter Nicholls (ed.) *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, London, Granada, 1979; Patrick Parrinder, *Science Fiction: Its Criticism and Teaching*, London, Methuen, 1980; Neil Barron (ed.), *Anatomy of Wonder: A Critical Guide to Science Fiction*, London, R. R. Bowker, 1981; Mark Rose, *Alien Encounters: Anatomy of Science Fiction*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1981;

**David Pringle, *Science Fiction: The 100 Best Novels*, London,
Xanadu, 1985.**

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