

Kevin Wymer
First Year
English 118W Epstein
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Communication, Confusion, and Martians

“Ulla, ulla, ulla, ulla.” Within this, the entire vernacular input of the Martians in H.G. Wells’ *War of the Worlds* is contained. Four words slipped into the congested mass of dire attempts by humans to communicate; slipped into the conglomeration of human panic, screaming, squealing, and utterly nauseating confusion. Human speech, both through dialect and the mass media, is frustratingly portrayed by Wells as ineffective and often times hindering. This inability to communicate highlights the inferiority and primitiveness of humans as compared to the Martians, which Wells emphasizes through a direct parallelism between humans and animals. Vividly contrasted with the communication of the humans, the virtual absence of speech between the Martians distinguishes them as the superior species and further exploits the futility and weakness of man.

Throughout the novel, Wells develops a strong connection between humans and the ideas of confusion, disorganization, ignorance, and naivety, each of which stems from the dialect between the human characters of the story. Speech serves as the manifestation of the failed communication characteristic of the humans throughout the novel. The inability of men to communicate with one another is immediately displayed when the narrator attempts to relay the events of his first encounter with the Martians. He asks the others in the town if they have “heard of the men from Mars” to which “all three of them laughed” (p.32). Wells juxtaposes the grave arrival of a disaster with “laughter” to cynically portray the dire inability of people to communicate among one another. The narrator desperately attempts to warn people of the crisis soon to arrive, yet cannot even be taken seriously. This lack of communication becomes apparent

once again when the narrator and the artilleryman attempt to find the army headquarters but “no one in Weybridge [can] tell [them] where headquarters were established” (p. 59). The narrator describes how “the whole place was in confusion,” and Wells leaves no doubt that this is the result of failed communication (p. 59). The first man whom the narrator encounters in this town does not even realize that Martians have arrived and instead remains focused on his “vallyble” flowerpots (p. 59). The inferiority of the humans is not only portrayed by the lack of communication in this situation, but also through the very dialect of the man. The country vernacular of the man, evident in the word “vallyble,” emphasizes of the rural English setting, with its connotations of simplicity and relative intellectual and technological inferiority (p. 59). Wells’ inclusion of this primitive and basic style of living coincides with his presentation of humans as the inferior species throughout the novel. Speech not only fails in its attempts to spread the news of the Martians, but at many instances even serves as a destructive aspect of human society. When the narrator and the curator are hiding in the house next to the Martian’s cylinder, the curator begins to speak “threats and entreaties mingled with a torrent of half-sane... repentance for his vacant sham of God’s service” (p. 138). This speech threatens the safety of the narrator and eventually leads him to kill the curator, which he does with “one last touch of humanity,” marking the narrator’s complete degradation into an animalistic state. (p. 139). Speech does not distinguish the humans as intellectual beings, but rather drags them down towards a far more primitive and inferior level.

Wells portrays human inferiority not only on the level of communication between individuals, but also through attempts at mass communication. Wells makes many references to the futility of human media, particularly the newspaper, and questions its reliability throughout the novel. As he is wandering around town following the night of the Martians arrival, the

narrator comments on how the “morning papers had contained only a very inaccurate description of the killing” (p. 39). Wells uses the word “inaccurate” to portray the unreliability of the newspaper, a sentiment present throughout the remainder of the novel. Wells depicts how on the day of the arrival of the Martians there was “nothing of this in the papers except a little note... and the world went on in ignorance” (p. 41). The high level of attention Wells gives to the newspaper conveys the idea that it is the responsibility of such media to convey events accurately- a duty which Wells clearly he believes has not been met. He once again points this out when the narrator describes the announcement of the *St. James Gazette* of “the bare fact of the interruption of the telegraphic communication” (p. 73). The newspaper has failed to communicate the necessary information to the people. The Martians have interrupted much more than “telegraphic communication,” they have crushed the English countryside, unaffected by human attempts to impede their progress. The narrator exclaims, “Death is coming!” (p. 59), death not only on an individual scale but seemingly the death of the entire human species, yet the newspaper feels it unnecessary to devote more than a few lines to the subject. This idea is reiterated when the narrator’s brother wakes up to a panicked London and sees a “man selling unnaturally early newspapers” in “a grotesque mingling of profit and panic” (p. 81). Here, as in each of the major developments with the Martians, the people turn to the newspaper to gain news, yet once again mass communication fails to meet this need. Wells’ reference to “profit” in this situation directly connects the newspaper to a societal value that has become worthless. Money has clearly lost its worth in a society which is no longer under the rule of human standards or laws. The man the narrator’s brother sees on his way out of London portrays this when he “fl[i]ngs” himself at his “heap of coins” and, as a result, has his back broken by a wagon and lays “writhing in the dust” (p. 100). Wells uses the depiction of this man and his lust

for money to reflect the epitome of human futility. The man loses his ability to survive in order to preserve a relic of the past organization of human society, a relic which will in no way help him against the onslaught of the Martians. Like money, the newspapers no longer help people and instead have become a remnant- a representation of the aspects of human society that have become impractical. It seems that rather than supplying the people with the news they need, the papers are always one step behind, one step too late, too incomplete, or too inaccurate to successfully warn the people. As a result, the people of London, the hub of England, go to bed “oblivious and inert” and awaken “to a vivid sense of danger” (p. 81). The crisis reveals a paralysis of mass media; with a broken back of its own, the media struggles to hold on to the organization of the past, but fails miserably.

By representing of the humans’ attempts at communication as futile, Wells expresses the overall degradation of the people towards their most primitive and basic nature. The narrator depicts the panicked reaction of the people to the heat ray on the night of the arrival of the Martians and them “bolt[ing] as blindly as a flock of sheep” (p. 29). Wells uses the parallelism between humans and animals present throughout the novel to convey the true inferiority of the humans to the Martians. Wells parallels humans to “frogs,” “bees,” and multiple times to “ants,” such as when he mirrors the Martians actions to those of a man reacting to the “confusion of ants in a nest against which his foot has kicked” (p. 62). Instances in which characters are clearly devolved towards a more primitive nature reinforce these parallelisms between animals and humans. A prime example occurs when the artilleryman reveals his plan for survival to the narrator when they meet for the second time. The artilleryman describes his plan to “live. . . underground” in the drains to avoid becoming a “tame beast,” and goes into much detail depicting the preservation of the human species and an eventual rebellion against the Martians

(p. 158). This preposterous and childish reaction to the Martians epitomizes the degradation of the humans into a state of fear and disillusionment. The artilleryman's effort to formulate and communicate a plan is ridiculous, as is much of the reaction to the Martians across England. In the short period of Martian rule, the humans completely lose sight of logic and reasoning. Due to the lack of effective communication, the people have degraded into the state of primitive animals; with only the ability of confused and futile speech, they have been "dethrone[ed]" (p. 142) and are truly like a "hive of bees."

The description of the ineptitude and outpouring of human attempts at communication presented by Wells sharply contrasts with the effective, and often times silent, communication of the Martians. The narrator describes how he is "convinced...that the Martians interchanged thoughts without any physical intermediation" and the "quasi-muscles" that were present in their machines (p. 124). The narrator portrays a picture of fluid-like efficiency, with the Martians accomplishing their task with complete order and organization. The Martians' true advancement is further emphasized by the idea that they are accomplishing this "without any physical intermediation." In comparison to the humans' necessity for media such as the newspapers, this creates a distinctive separation between the two species. The newspapers are constantly attempting to connect humans but fail to spread information effectively and instead leave the world in "ignorance" (p. 6). The humans not only need a mediator to communicate, but fail in their attempt to create one. Wells uses the contrast between the communication of the Martians and that of the humans to support the Martians as "the most unearthly creatures it is possible to conceive" (p. 124), an idea further represented through the many references to the "mechanical intelligence" (p. 33) and "engine" like traits of the Martians (p. 122). This lends to the portrayal of the Martians as distinctly and vastly superior to the humans. Because of the distance created

between the two species, the Martians are placed at a superior and formidable position to the humans.

Despite the ability of the Martians to communicate “without any physical intermediation,” Wells does include a finite number of key instances in which the Martians verbally communicate. After the Martian is hit by human artillery as they are advancing through the English countryside, the narrator describes a “deafening” noise of the “clangorous din of the Martians” “stooping over the . . . ruin of their comrade” (p.64). Additionally, the narrator, while wandering through London believing he is “the Last Man Left Alive” (p. 174), describes hearing the sound of “ulla, ulla, ulla, ulla,” followed by a silence that “came like a thunderclap” (p.168). Notable here is that in the two instances in which the Martians use verbal communication, they are in a highly emotional situation, closing the gap between them and the humans. In the first, they are mourning over the “ruin of their comrade,” a situation in which they are displayed as weak and vulnerable for the first time. Speech has been a distinctly human trait up to this point, and thus serves as a palpable connection between the Martians and the humans. When the narrator hears the sound of “ulla, ulla, ulla, ulla,” he hears the last surviving alien mourning the fall of his species. This is an ironically direct parallelism to the narrator believing he was “the last man alive” and once again serves as a connection between the humans and the Martians.

Voice is unexpectedly employed as a hindrance upon humans and instead superiority is granted to those seeming to lack the necessity for such communication. Voice serves as the connection for both species in this novel; the connection to each other and essentially the connection to weakness. It is when speech is used that the vulnerability of both humans and the Martians is displayed. Wells assails man at his highest level and uses this to break him down to inferiority; placing humans into uncharted territory reiterated by comparing them to animals and

highlighting the ineffectiveness and futile aspects of society. This placement questions the role humans have taken and leads to the degradation of humans' assurance of "their empire over matter."²²