

The Martian Mirror: Humanity's Existential Crisis in the Anthropocene

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ABSTRACT

H.G. Wells' science fiction novel, *The War of the Worlds* envisions a reality where human existence is no longer isolated but intricately connected to the universe and the unknown. The anticipation of extraterrestrial life challenges the notion of human superiority, forcing a reconsideration of humanity's place in the cosmos. Influenced by Charles Darwin's theories of evolution, Wells presents a conflict between organic beings, both terrestrial and extraterrestrial, highlighting the fragility of life and the ecosystems that sustain it. From an ecocritical perspective, *The War of the Worlds* reflects themes of destruction and vulnerability of life beyond human dominance. The novel has inspired numerous adaptations, including films and television series, each interpreting respective themes through different lenses. The novel focuses on social and political conflicts concerning the Anthropocene. One of its most significant departures from the original text is the depiction of aliens. Rather than portraying the invaders as Martians, the series reimagines them as future humans, introducing a new dimension to the struggle for survival. The present paper explores the modern adaptation drawing from Wells' original narrative and reshaping its central conflict to address contemporary anxieties. By replacing Martians with a future human race, the series raises urgent questions about

humanity's impact on the planet, the consequences of technological and environmental transformations, and the fragility of human existence. In doing so, it fosters a timely dialogue about our role as planetary forces and the ethical responsibilities we bear toward our world and its future.

Keywords: Anthropocene, Posthuman, Ecological crisis, Human dominance, Environmental degradation, Science Fiction

INTRODUCTION

The term *Anthropocene*, coined and defined by Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer in the early twenty-first century refers to an ecological epoch shaped by the increasing dominance of human activity over Earth's natural processes. Jonathan Hay has postulated in the article, "*(Post) human Temporalities: Science Fiction in the Anthropocene*", describes the Anthropocene as "the rapid intensification of our species' adverse impact upon our host planet" (Hay 131). He further characterizes it as a "damning acknowledgment of the planetary changes prompted by our species' unqualified failure to sustain a mutualistic interaction with the Earth" (Hay 131). This failure to maintain a balanced relationship with the natural world has been widely debated. Stacy Alaimo, in an interview, critiques the prevailing perception of humanity's role in the Anthropocene. She argues that the era is

often framed as if the human agent is separate from the world it has transformed, creating a false sense of detachment from the environmental damage inflicted. Instead of viewing this epoch with pride or optimism, Alaimo calls for a recognition of the deep interconnections between humans and nonhuman nature, emphasizing the vulnerabilities faced by different human populations in the face of ecological crisis. Science fiction, as a speculative genre, often problematizes and critiques humanity's perceived dominance by exploring alternative futures and existential threats. Many works in the genre envision Earth's evolving conditions, imagining speculative futures shaped by environmental degradation, technological advancements, or extraterrestrial encounters. These narratives frequently depict outer space and unknown dimensions as forces that challenge human supremacy and question the survival of both humanity and the planet itself.

In "*Other Environments: Ecocriticism and Science Fiction*", Benjamin Buhler highlights the compatibility between science fiction and ecocritical thinking. He argues that "the design of alien environments and the focus on the relationship between humans and these environments make science fiction a particularly interesting genre for ecocriticism" (127-128).

This speculative mode of critical writing examines the evolving relationship between humanity and nature, particularly in light of technological advancements and environmental exploitation. As Serenella Iovino observes, "Unexpected kinships, cautionary tales, problematic intimacies, and visions of futures embedded in our present: for more than a century, speculative fiction has spoken the language of our ecological imagination". Through these narratives, science fiction provides a platform to confront both current and impending threats to human and planetary existence.

Science fiction, as we recognize it today, emerged in the nineteenth century, coinciding with the onset of the Anthropocene, at the advent of steam

engines and the rise of industrial culture in England. Both the Anthropocene and science fiction inherently suggest a post-human future. The concept of the post-human is deeply embedded within science fiction, serving diverse roles from envisioning technologically enhanced human beings to evoking fear about a techno-scientifically altered future. The posthuman perspective highlights the fragility of human existence and underscores the urgent need for transformative changes that foster a symbiotic relationship between humanity and the environment, ensuring the survival of both.

The concept of the posthuman embraces plurality and challenges the rigid notion of human exceptionalism that upholds anthropocentrism. Rather than demonizing science or technology, it acknowledges their role in enhancing and sustaining human life. The posthuman perspective fosters a reimagining of agency, allowing for a more fluid and interconnected relationship with ecology. In *Posthumanism in Literature and Ecocriticism*, Serenella Iovino describes the posthuman as a dynamic force that "moves, relentlessly shifting the boundaries of being and things, of ontology, epistemology....". These boundaries, particularly those between the human and the nonhuman, are not static but continuously evolving, reshaping our understanding of existence.

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In the modern world, human-induced environmental changes have already led to the extinction of numerous animal species, raising a haunting question: could humans face the same fate? The unsustainable actions of humanity threaten the conditions

necessary for their own survival, making extinction an increasingly probable future. Recognizing the interconnectedness of human existence and the necessity for ethical engagement in the present is crucial for ensuring a habitable future in the Anthropocene.

Science fiction, particularly when depicting a posthuman future, offers a lens through which we can reflect on our present and anticipate what lies ahead. The present article examines H.G. Wells' *The War of the Worlds*' modern television adaptation, *War of the Worlds*. These works present two distinct posthuman futures, set in different ecological and historical contexts within the Anthropocene. As Paul Crutzen suggests on the Anthropocene "could be said to have started in the latter part of the eighteenth century". Wells' novel is inherently a product of this era. While the original text critiques the social, economic, and political realities of the Victorian world, the TV adaptation recontextualizes its themes for the 21st century, allowing us to analyze the fragility of human existence and the limitations of human dominance.

Wells, influenced by the industrial and colonial triumphs of his time, used the Martian invasion to critique imperialism, reversing the colonial gaze by portraying Europeans as the subjugated rather than the conquerors. While many scholars interpret the novel as an allegory for interplanetary colonialism, this study examines its apocalyptic invasion narrative as a critique of human ecological dominance. Wells interrogates the anthropocentric worldview that places humanity at the pinnacle of nature's hierarchy. The term 'world' is particularly significant in this regard, as it encompasses multiple meanings such as the physical planet, the constructed social and cultural realities of human life, and the interconnected totality of existence.

The epigraph of the novel, "But who shall dwell in these worlds if they are inhabited?... Are we or they Lords of the World?... And how are all things made for man?" challenges the assumption of human

supremacy by questioning whether humans are truly the masters of their world. Helen Feder, in *Ecocriticism, Posthumanism, and the Biological Idea of Culture*, similarly interrogates the notion of "we" and the "world," asking whether we conceive of ourselves as separate from the world or as an integral part of it: "*We or the world or we as the world?*". She further argues that human bodies themselves are ecosystems, woven into the fabric of the natural world.

The Martians in *The War of the Worlds* function as a narrative device to expose both human and environmental vulnerability. Their invasion disrupts the balance of life, just as human industrial expansion has disrupted ecosystems on Earth. The aliens' advanced intelligence and technology reflect humanity's own relentless pursuit of dominance. The novel repeatedly draws parallels between human colonialism and the Martian invasion. The Martians, anatomically distinct from humans, arrive in cylindrical vessels that pierce the Earth "like a poisoned dart" (TWW 59), unleashing destruction through their heat rays and chemical warfare. Their toxic "black smoke" (TWW 95) blankets the Thames, suffocating all life in its path. This dual annihilation of nature and humanity underscores their interdependence of human existence cannot be separated from the ecological systems that sustain it.

The novel also explores the psychological and moral implications of catastrophe. The Curate, confronted with mass extinction, questions whether humanity is being punished for its moral failings: "There was poverty, sorrow; the poor were trodden in the dust, and I held my peace" (TWW 141). This existential crisis raises critical questions about human self-perception: do we see ourselves as separate from the world or as part of an interconnected whole? Wells further critiques the mind/body dualism that fuels industrial and colonial exploitation, warning that intelligence without ethical grounding leads to destruction as, "Without the body the brain would, of course, become a mere selfish intelligence, without any of

the emotional substratum of the human being” (TWW 139).

The 2019 TV adaptation “War of the Worlds” takes this critique further, reimagining the aliens not as extraterrestrials but as posthumans, descendants of the current human race who have returned from the future. These beings, born from an accidental genetic mutation, were exiled to an exoplanet, only to deplete its resources. Now, they have traveled back in time, seeking vengeance against scientist Bill Ward, whose virus threatens their survival. Their struggle for dominance is a battle between two versions of humanity viz. one complacent in its exploitation of the Earth and another fighting to reclaim it. This reworking of the alien figure aligns with posthumanist thought, rejecting rigid boundaries between human and nonhuman while highlighting the consequences of ecological recklessness.

The adaptation deepens its critique by incorporating climate change as a central theme. In Season 3, environmental degradation manifests physically through a massive black hole, the result of both human and alien manipulation of space-time. This apocalyptic imagery parallels real-world climate crises, reinforcing the series’ underlying message: human actions have lasting consequences that may render the planet uninhabitable. Astronomer Catherine Durand explores the implications of multiple dimensions, suggesting that alternative futures and alternative fates are possible. However, the looming threat of planetary annihilation raises an urgent question: is there still time to change course?

The *War of the Worlds* adaptation thus transforms Wells’ critique of Victorian-era colonialism into a broader examination of the Anthropocene. The conflict between present-day humans and their future counterparts illustrates a fundamental posthuman dilemma: the struggle for survival in a world irrevocably shaped by human actions. The alien-humans’ reproductive crisis, resulting from

environmental imbalance and genetic mutation, eerily mirrors current concerns about fertility decline linked to pollution and climate change. Their use of advanced technology to nurture stolen human fetuses underscores the desperate lengths to which life will go to sustain itself.

Ultimately, both Wells’ novel and its adaptation serve as cautionary tales about the fragility of human existence. The arrival of the aliens, whether Martian or posthuman, is a reckoning, forcing humanity to confront its vulnerability. As Gabriel Byrne, who plays Bill Ward, notes: “In our time, the threat no longer comes from space, but from our very planet... Nothing says that we are not going to disappear in the short term”.

The invading Martians embody an existential threat—a technologically superior force that exposes the vulnerabilities of humanity. This can be likened to the challenges we face today, such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and ecological destruction, where human progress paradoxically endangers our survival. The Martians’ ruthless exploitation of Earth’s resources mirrors how humanity has treated the planet, raising questions about whether we, too, act as invaders upon our own world.

CONCLUSION

Eventually, *The War of the Worlds* ends with the downfall of the Martians—not through human ingenuity, but by Earth’s smallest organisms: bacteria. This humbling conclusion emphasizes that humanity is neither above nature nor in full control of it. In the Anthropocene, this reminds us to respect the delicate balance of life and to reconsider our role as stewards rather than conquerors of the planet.

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