

## Wells and the Curriculum

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Since his initial impact in the 1890s with scientific romances like *The Time Machine*, Wells's reputation has risen, fallen, then risen again. From the turn of the century to the end of the Great War, his prodigious output of science fiction, comic novels, social novels and socialist polemic won him celebrity as one of the most imaginative, entertaining and stimulating writers of the age. In the years after 1918, however, while his fame as a public figure continued to increase (largely thanks to international sales of the *Outline of History*), his artistic achievements and standing both went into a decline. All aspects of his reputation seem to have nose-dived after his death in 1946, reaching their lowest point during the Cold War - a period dominated, at least in intellectual circles, by a sulky and self-righteous pessimism incompatible with Wells's exuberance, imagination and humour.

Since 1960, when John Hammond founded the H. G. Wells Society (a conjunction of dates which may not be entirely coincidental), Wells's stock has moved steadily upwards. Today it is possible to announce interest in, or even actual enthusiasm for, Wells's writings without provoking a grunt of amazement, a sudden pace backwards and a worried narrowing of the eyes. Yet, while other formerly unfashionable figures such as Tennyson seem to have been rehabilitated with few reservations, Wells has still to achieve unqualified respectability in literary circles. There is no reason to suppose that this lack of esteem from professors, teachers and journalists would have bothered Wells himself, but it has naturally been a source of irritation to his admirers.

Several explanations have been advanced as to why Wells's artistry is undervalued; in all likelihood a combination of factors is to blame. One explanation which I cannot recall having seen advanced hitherto, and which I therefore wish to put forward now, is

that until recently there has been a mismatch between Wells's aesthetic and the needs of our education system. (I am thinking of the British system, but the argument may transpose elsewhere.) Just think of the massive subsidies posthumously conferred on some of Wells's contemporaries: James, Hardy, Conrad, Yeats, Lawrence, Forster. Certain of their works are felt to be particularly suitable as examination texts, and individuals and institutions are therefore required to purchase them in huge numbers.

So what exactly are the requirements of a good set text? Just like a good ski slope, it has to offer both the right level and the right type of difficulty. If it isn't hard work to negotiate, then getting through it successfully will not be much of an achievement. The author must have a style which self-evidently demands interpretation and commentary. At least some of the central characters must be obscure in their motivation and ambiguous in their significance. To guarantee really high status, the author must fit neatly into Literary History as one who has contributed to the Progress of the Novel by making the correct innovations in technique for the period. While it is certainly a help if the author tackles big themes, or deals with subject matter which is interesting from the point of view of social history, such optional extras must be securely contained within the artistic framework of the novel. After all, in the academy there are demarcation lines to be respected. Literature is not History, Sociology or Politics (unless, that it, it is taught by a Marxist, in which case a reconciliation has somehow to be effected between all the above criteria and the Marxist Interpretation of History - at one time a complex task, now made easy by the fashionable assertions that readers are free to make texts mean anything they want, so long as what they want is politically correct, and that history and society are themselves nothing but texts.)

If the above really are the requirements of the exam market, Wells is ill-placed to compete in it. Not only are his books a comparatively easy read, they are positively entertaining. Like Fielding or Dickens, he tends to use fairly straightforward characters. Furthermore, he does not gratefully

accept the baton of literary merit from the Victorians and relay it respectfully to the Modernists, in accordance with the official History of the Novel, but swerves off to take part in what seems to be a different event entirely. His forebears include Plato, Swift, Sterne and Peacock, and his literary descendants are an awkward squad featuring Zamyatin, Lawrence, Orwell, Golding, Borges and Ballard. The Great Tradition this certainly ain't.

Truth to tell, Wells's prose has much to commend it to the student. Compared to other writers of the late-Victorian and Edwardian periods, he is remarkable free of stuffy periphrases and inflated sentence structures, and his canny mix of linguistic registers would certainly repay detailed study. There is much to be said, also, for the way he treats the novel as a historic synthesis of narrative strategies which can be dismantled and renovated with reference to its eighteenth century origin, but this kind of formal experimentation, along with other matters of which Wells is a master, like rhythm, pace and tone, have not traditionally figured in the curricula either of school pupils or undergraduates. When it comes to social history or big themes, Wells gives place to no one, but even here he presents problems, going out of his way to ensure that his themes are not cosily framed within the aesthetic patterns of the book. It is always Wells's intention to propel the reader back into the world charged with a sense of the possible and equipped with exciting new perspectives, not to construct a self-contained aesthetic object like Keats's urn.

And yet, as Sylvia Hardy argues elsewhere in this issue of the *Wellsian*, there are signs that the educational establishment may now be moving Wells's way. The Modernist/New Critical aesthetic I have caricatured in the last three paragraphs seems to have been exhausted by the expansion of Higher Education over the last thirty years - all the possible essays have now been written, several times - and the Post-Modern bandwagon is up and rolling. Lecturers are on the lookout for texts which have been marginalised or excluded by the traditional canon, which flaunt their contradictions and their

fictionality, which refuse to impose a final view but instead invite the reader to participate in the very act of creation. Wells's best work fits this description to a T, and evidence of renewed academic interest from this perspective can be seen, for example, in some of the more recent pieces included in *Critical Essays on H. G. Wells* edited by John Huntington (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1991).

In the schools too there are now signs of renewed interest in Wells. In April 1993 the Department of Education published proposals to revise the English order of the National Curriculum, the programme taught to all state school students and many in private schools. At Key Stages 3 and 4 (i.e. between the ages of eleven and sixteen) pupils would, if these new proposals were adopted, read a range of fiction, some of which would have to be taken from a list of recommended authors, including H. G. Wells.

It must be said that the order has been widely opposed by teachers and educationalists on a number of grounds. I myself have challenged many of the recommendations, including the requirement that specified authors and texts should be taught. (Shakespeare is perhaps the exception that proves the rule). Not only is the list of recommended authors an arbitrary jumble, it is an unhealthy precedent, offering partisan Secretaries of State the temptation to have the list revised to advance authors whom they feel to be ideologically sound. Given that teachers with limited time and budgets may have to confine themselves to the officially-appointed writers, it is also liable to increase the difficulty of finding suitable authors for the needs of particular students or classes, and to inhibit experiment with fresh texts. Many of us would rather see a specimen list, to indicate the kind of books thought suitable for each age group, but with ultimate choice left to teachers, under the benign influence of advisers, inspectors and professional associations. However, one would hope that such a list would still include H. G. Wells and, allowing for the reservations I have expressed, it is heartening to see such official recognition of his merit.

Assuming for the sake of argument that Wells did become a standard author for school English classes, how might teachers best approach his work? I will conclude by sketching some possibilities with reference to the short stories.

The proposed order stipulates that pupils should "learn about different genres and recognise their characteristics, including structural and organisational features." To apply this knowledge to a text successfully is one of the requirements for the highest level of attainment. One suspects that what the DFE have in mind are genres like tragedy and lyric poetry, but one could certainly make a start at Key Stage 3 by considering definitions of science fiction, along with the vexed question of where the line is to be drawn between sf and related genres such as fantasy and horror fiction. Groups of pupils might try classifying some of Wells's stories and explaining what criteria and evidence they used in reaching their conclusion (which might, of course, be that some stories are a mixture). 'The Sea Raiders,' 'The Story of the Late Mr Elvesham,' 'In the Avu Observatory' and 'The Country of the Blind' would be especially worth considering in this context. To make the exercise fully worthwhile, one would need to finish by having the class write their own stories, together with a brief (or not so brief) commentary on their generic characteristics and the decisions which had led to these.

The "Response to Literature" sections of the proposed order are less than satisfactory because there is insufficiently clear distinction between the requirements of the ten levels of attainment. (Rumour has it that the ten-level approach will soon be scrapped.) Most involve some reference to the interrelation of language, structure and themes, however, and one way into this area of study, whatever the level of the outcome, would be to examine Wells's presentation of the fantastic: his use of detailed description, realistic settings, reporterly techniques and gradual disclosure of information to authenticate the outlandish events of the story. Again 'The Country of the Blind' and 'The Sea Raiders' would be suitable texts, as would 'The Star' and 'The New Accelerator'. All deal with the

theme of humanity's limited perceptions and complacency, the last warns of the dangers of medical advance with special reference to new drugs (certainly still topical after a hundred years) and the first shows the problems of the individual at odds with society, a theme readily pursued through cross-reference to the work of other authors (which is a requirement for level 9).

For "imaginative and compelling language" and "structural devices," one could do worse than make a blow-by-blow analysis of 'The Star' or 'Under the Knife,' jotting down notes on the titles, the openings, the narrative mode (first or third person? omniscient or limited?), points of view (from where do we 'see' the story? when does this shift and why?), the sequence (where are the events told out of normal chronological order?), duration (how does story-time differ from real-time?), contrasts of events and characters, and so on. Possibly, to cut down boredom and maximise efficiency, each aspect of the analysis could be allocated to a separate pair or group, then the findings pooled by presentations and class discussion. 'The Door in the Wall' is another text which would respond particularly well to this approach, and would naturally provoke discussion of "the motivation and behaviour of characters."

Having done this kind of analysis at school, students might acquire a sufficiently firm grounding in the practicalities of narratology and rhetoric to respond with intelligence and discrimination when spun yarns later in life, by reporters, salespersons, advertisers, politicians and even literary theorists. This would indeed be a valuable contemporary application for Wells's writings.