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An Identification of and Suggested Reasons for the Differences between the 1905 H.G. Wells Novel, *Kipps: the Story of a Simple Soul*, and the 1941 Carol Reed film, *Kipps*

Kipps first appeared in 1905 and is set in south-east England. The main character of the story is Arthur Kipps, a young man from New Romney who is sent to Folkestone as an apprentice draper at Shalford's Bazaar. Shalford agrees to Kipps's training for seven years on the condition that he adheres to the emporium's "system" and learns "fishency" (29-30). When he reaches twenty-one years of age, Kipps inherits a legacy which makes him wealthy and flings him headlong into the prosperous upper-middle class. As a wealthy man, he realises he has a duty to live up to his means and he obtains a teacher of social graces, Chester Coote. Coote encourages Kipps to engage his former woodwork teacher, Miss Walsingham, and he acquiesces. However, he very quickly realises that wealth does not bring happiness. He longs to enjoy the friendships of his earlier, less prosperous life. He thus runs off with his boyhood sweetheart and breaks his engagement with Miss Walsingham. Kipps eventually loses his wealth through his conniving solicitor but gains some of it back as a result of an investment in a successful comedy play. The novel ends when Kipps marries his lover, Ann Pomick, they buy a bookshop and begin a family in financial comfort.

Wells wrote the story at a time of great social upheaval. The suffragists were at their height, organised labour was showing renewed militancy, Ireland was spiralling towards civil war and the "Teutonic Menace" was beginning to outproduce British manufacturers and compete for naval supremacy.¹ These factors were in Wells's mind during his completion of *Kipps*. Wells believed that many of Britain's problems were grounded in the very makeup of society, a society controlled by a wealthy elite virtually impenetrable by the lower classes. By breaking up the unfair class structure of society, opening up and modernising the education system and ending religious control over people's lives, Wells believed Britain could again regain her place of ascendancy within the world order and guide the world toward a federal union. *Kipps*, therefore, was Wells's vehicle for revealing the nation's ills to the

¹ See Ensor pp. 378, 397-98m 404-5, 412, 452.

general public. Although the novel was slow to take off the first, in time it came to be one of Wells's best-selling works of fiction.

The 1941 film, *Kipps*, was similarly prepared at a time of great upheaval for Britain and the world. America and Russia were still isolationist, Britain's continental allies were defeated and Britain was struggling alone in war against the Nazi menace.² The class-riddled social structure was still very much alive in Britain and, since 1905, the country seemed to have advanced very little by it. The release of *Kipps* in the cinema in 1941 again displayed an overt attack on the social hierarchy and, although 1941 was by no means identical to 1905, the audience was encouraged to recognise the parallels presented by the film.

Thus, the novel and the film both present a basic theme to their audiences: that the existing elitist rule in Britain was no longer maintaining national security and prosperity as it had done for much of the previous century. But if the two versions of *Kipps* draw the same conclusions, do they also produce the same solutions? An analysis of the text and the film suggests that the original arguments presented by Wells in the book were very different from those portrayed by Carol Reed in the film. The divergencies can be highlighted under the following headings: (i) commercial corruption, (ii) lower-middle class respectability and (iii) the Socialist message.

Commercial Corruption

Wells in the novel portrayed Kipps as a draper, which he himself had been,³ and he used his own bitter experiences to reveal the corruption rife in the dog-eat-dog world of the middle-sized retail establishment. In the novel, Shalford, the drapery-owner, is examined in greater detail than in the film and the bourgeois business-ethic is examined in greater detail than in the film and the bourgeois business ethic is sharply criticised through Wells's portrayal of him. For example, Wells represented Shalford as corrupt when "in paying his wholesalers [Shalford's] 'system' admitted of a constant error in the discount of a penny or twopence" (30). The point Wells was making was one of cunning individualism. For, if a middle-sized drapery will discount a penny or two from its bills then what of a larger, more prosperous business? Also, if a wholesaler is cheated out of pennies, what must be the situation with regard to Shalford's tax payments? Wells's charge was a serious one, concealed behind a comic front. Wells re-emphasised this point later in the book when he wrote,

² See A.J.P. Taylor ch. 14,

³ See *Experiment in Autobiography*, 146-56.

"it facilitated business, [Shalford] alleged, to ignore odd pence in the cheques he wrote" (30). On the basis of these accusations, Wells's attitude towards people of business was not very positive. He saw a society riddled with commercial corruption and, by definition, he thus saw the nation as corrupt and run on self-interest. It was this governing attitude that Wells desired to see ended if Britain was to climb once again to pre-eminence in world affairs.

Viewing the film with Wells's vision in mind, however, we realise the sympathies of the film-makers. Although the film portrays Shalford as strict and demanding in his running of the shop, there is no evidence in the film to suggest corruption or underhand dealing. The film portrays the drapery as smooth and efficient and infers that this is a result of disciplined management. By altering the role and image of Shalford, therefore, the film presents an acceptable view of shop-management. The new image portrayed in the film is ideologically loaded and, although the film is happy to criticise certain aspects of society, Wells's representation of the commercial class as being corrupt to the point of illegality was considered either too extreme or an undesirable position for the film-makers to take.

Lower-Middle Class Respectability

A further theme running through the novel was that of lower-middle class respectability. Wells himself said of the novel:

Kipps is designed to present a typical member of the English lower-middle class in all its pitiful limitations and feebleness, and beneath a treatment deliberately kindly it generally provides a sustained and fairly exhaustive criticism of the ideals and ways of life of the great mass of middle-class English people.⁴

Wells, coming from a lower-middle class family himself (*Autobiography* 38-42), was highly critical of class attitudes and assumptions. In the novel, he attacks the class attitudes of Kipps's childhood and apprenticeship. Kipps is portrayed as being uneasy and unsure of his role within his class. An example of this is when Kipps's "aunt would appear at door or window to interrupt interesting conversation with children who were upon unknown grounds considered 'low' and undesirable" (9). Wells uses "upon unknown grounds" very aptly here, as this statement sums up the lower-middle class attitude completely. There was no logic behind guardians preventing their

⁴ From a letter, Wells to Frederick Macmillan, qtd in Lovat Dickson, p. 145.

children from mixing with other children, except for a gained sense of social superiority through so doing. It was that snobbery that Wells looked to end in society. The needless feeling of betterment over one's contemporaries was seen by Wells as a social ill as it drove a wedge between sections of society and prevented co-operative improvement on a national scale. Further impositions on the childhood Kipps were that "one had to say one's 'grace', hold one's spoon and fork in mad, unnatural ways called 'properly', and refrain from eating even nice, sweet things too fast" (8). These rules imposed upon Kipps were not hygienic but garnish and were meant to represent one's social position.

With Kipps, the regulations imposed upon him as a child continued into adult life, as, when he worked at Shalford's, "on Sundays he was obliged to go to church" (34). Church attendance among the middle classes was very much a status symbol. Those who renounced religion weren't only seen as "unchristian", but were also regarded as "base" or "common". These attitudes infuriated Wells and were undoubtedly one of the causes of his vehement antireligious stand throughout most of his life (*Autobiography* 48). There were other issues of class distinction which Wells attacked in his novel, such as "carrying gloves, open[ing] doors [for ladies], never say[ing] 'miss' to a girl, and walk[ing] 'outside' [a lady]" (44). The reason for his dislike was that these trivialities were intended to distinguish the middle- from the lower classes of society and again they were to blame, as far as Wells was concerned, for dividing society rather than uniting the country towards national co-operation. Additionally, those class-posturings were responsible for cementing the class-structure into place. Due to the ardent class loyalty and respect for one's "betters", any attempt by the individual to ascent the class-ladder was near impossible.

In the film version of *Kipps*, the social graces of the upper-middle classes were attacked as strongly as in the book but the lower-middle class attitudes, which Wells loathed, were portrayed in a by no means critical way. The rules and regulations guiding Kipps's life as a child and as a draper were represented but were not shown as needless or unnecessary, let alone harmful. The film was made as a criticism of the attitudes because he saw them as disruptive of social co-operation. The film-makers, on the other hand, were not trying to propound any sense of social co-operation on an equality basis but were aiming at criticising the ruling class attitudes in order to gain a more responsible ruling class. There was no intention of breaking down the class-divisions of society, as far as the film-makers were

concerned. This represents a fundamental difference between Wells's aim in the novel and the aim of Carol Reed in the film. Thus the purpose of the film and the novel may have been similar, but clearly for different reasons.

The Socialist Message

Wells's final message in the novel was that of Socialism. Wells sympathised with Kipps as a drudging draper and represented his plight as being unfair. Wells also criticised the corruption of the commercial middle-class. In chapters four and seven of the novel, which were deleted completely from the film, Wells presented the alternative to lower-middle class drudgery and commercial corruption as being Socialism. Wells's Socialist hero in the novel is Kipps's boyhood friend, Sid Pornick, whom Kipps meets again as an adult following his inheritance. Wells's view is clearly expressed in Sid's attitude to wealth: "What is wealth? Labour robbed out of the poor... First you do something...of the world's work and it pays you hardly anything, and then it invites you to do nothing...and pays you twelve hundred pounds a year" (155-57). The injustice is clearly stated and the argument is taken up again later in the novel by Sid's lodger, Masterman, when he declares:

Collectively, the rich today have neither heart nor imagination... They own machinery, they have knowledge and instruments and powers beyond all previous dreaming and what are they doing with them? God gives them a power like the motor car, and all they can do with it is to go careering about the roads...killing children and making machinery hateful to the souls of men....this crew of rulers...foresees nothing, anticipates nothing! (17)

Wells's Socialist stand in the novel is important as it represents Wells's alternative to the social evils outlined earlier. The film, on the other hand, makes a real criticism of the attitude of the British ruling class without offering any practical alternative to the ruling class methods. Wells sums up his opinions of the British class system through Masterman, who describes Kipps situation thus: "You were starting a climb...that doesn't lead anywhere. You would have clambered from one refinement of vulgarity to another, and never got to any satisfactory top" (231). The ruling elite of Britain was very much a "closed shop" as far as Wells was concerned and a humble draper like Kipps was never going to be able to adapt to its expectations. This is the crux of the situation in the novel. The class system unshakeable is what Wells was attacking in the novel, and commercial corruption and lower-middle class respectability perpetuated that system. The film, however, is much more shallow. It criticises the

ruling class of Britain but shows no desire for the class-structure to cease. It is this attitude that explains the absence of Socialism from the film. To cut such a vital part of the novel out of the film reveals the truth behind the film-makers' aims.

The film was created during the early part of the Second World War and, with such a war raging, it was an ideal choice of film to make in order to criticise the follies caused by upper-middle class attitudes. The film does not present an anti-establishment view of the class structure of society, but more a reformist view of the ruling class attitude. By criticising the upper-middle class attitudes and priorities, the film reveals the errors of that class. The upper-middle class was portrayed in the film as being over-conscious of its appearance to the rest of society. It was represented as being more concerned about its appearance than about its "official" role in society. The film did not attack the class-based nature of British society, but recognised and tried to bolster its role.

The pro-establishment attitude of the film-makers was the complete antithesis of Wells's original aim of the novel; namely to discredit a class-riddled society and the rule of Britain by an elite or, as Lovat Dickson put it, "From Atlas House...this child of the late nineteenth century had come bursting with brains and energy and feeling, to report in books like *Kipps* and *Mr Polly* the inhumanity of one class to another" (313). Wells aimed at encouraging a society based not on individual or class hostility or improvement, but on co-operative, national improvement and hence his emphasis on Socialism. The division is absolutely clear between Wells's attitude in the book and the attitude of the film-makers.

In retrospect, the co-operative attitude propounded by Wells has sadly remained a pipe dream, whereas the film-makers' call for increased ruling class assertiveness has, to a large extent, come true. The class-based nature of British society remains unshaken.

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The view from Bun Hill: H G Wells, Kent and the Male Romance
(Dedicated to the memory of Bob Watkins¹)

H G Wells was, as the recent BBC2 "Bookmark" documentary described, a Bromley boy, born there while Bromley was a market town in Kent and not a London Borough, and his home at 47 High Street was called Atlas House. Perhaps we should expect that a writer and visionary born in Atlas House would have a natural inclination towards globalism, cosmopolitanism and world citizenship, and a divided attitude towards his native country. If, like me, you also grew up in Kent and read and enjoyed Wells at a young age, he certainly had a special appeal; but was this something essentially Wellsian or merely an effect of what George Pondervo in *Tono-Bungay* calls the "Accident of Birth"? (5). Just how important were local loyalties such as those to Bromley and Kent for Wells?

My own earliest distinct Wellsian memory is of being away at boarding school and reading in the school library a copy of *The Food of the Gods*, until I reached the passage where "a cyclist riding, feet up, down the hill between Sevenoaks and Tonbridge, very narrowly missed running over" the giant wasp that was crawling across the roadway in front of him. "His bicycle jumped the footpath in the emotion of the moment and when he could look back, the wasp was soaring away above the woods towards Westerham." (35). It was quite an emotional moment to come across that passage as a thirteen or fourteen year old boy whose home was in the direction of the woods towards Westerham and who had occasionally cycled down River Hill, the long hill on the old A21 south of Sevenoaks, where Wells's cyclist saw the giant wasp. In retrospect, I suppose I had "found my author".

John Hammond in his *H G Wells Companion* observes that though Wells was unquestionably a regional novelist of London and the southern Home Counties, "References to Bromley and the surrounding area are comparatively few in his fiction" (160). Those few

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