

**A ‘STRANGE BIRD’ IN A ‘STRANGE WORLD’:
ABILITY AND DIFFERENCE
IN H. G. WELLS’S *THE WONDERFUL VISIT***

Brenda Tyrrell

Abstract. This article applies key concepts of disability studies to H. G. Wells’s *The Wonderful Visit*, in order to show that Wells’s corpus is an early and progressive source for depictions of contemporary tenets of disability studies. First, the article reviews representations of disability in late-Victorian literature and Wells’s own experiences with disability. Alongside this, the concepts of impairment, disability, and the medical model are established. Next, the article performs a close reading of the text and highlights where Wells excels at practising a proto-disability studies stance, additionally pointing to areas where he reverts to a normative stance. Lastly, this article considers Wells’s minimal appearance in conversations at the intersections of disability studies and Wellsian scholarship, claiming that Wells’s works open significant opportunities in both Wellsian and disability studies scholarship to re-envision perceptions of ability and difference in new and incisive ways.

In the opening pages of H. G. Wells’s *The Wonderful Visit* (1895), the narrator describes the appearance of a ‘Strange Bird’ in Sidderton: ‘The glare, they say, was golden like a beam shining out of the sky, not a uniform blaze, but broken all over by curving flashes like the waving of swords’.¹ Despite this fantastical glare, only one person witnessed it (Annie) and only three people in the village heard it (Annie, Amory’s mother, and Lumpy Durgan, the ‘half-wit’), all describing it as a ‘sound like children’s singing and a throbbing of harp strings, carried on a rush of notes like that which comes from an organ’.² From this magnificent opening, the reader anticipates a tale of wondrous happenings and miraculous epiphanies. However, Wells has something different in mind, and the reader is quickly thrown into a different sort of tale, a tale that ends with an attempt to survive simply in this ‘strange’ world: ‘This world [...] wraps me round and swallows me up. My wings grow shrivelled and useless. Soon I shall be nothing more than a crippled man [...]. I am miserable. And I am alone’.³ This quote encapsulates the journey of one being as they experience the effects of being identified as different, and thus disabled, by the ‘normals’ in Wells’s novel.⁴ Notably, Wells, arguably the most influential science fiction author, not only experienced disability himself, but he also created worlds that inspired his readers to imagine a place where physical, mental, and sensory difference did not exist because cure and treatment were not the only options for his characters identified as disabled. Further, while Wells is identified at times as progenitor of many science fiction tropes, very rarely does his name or *oeuvre* make an appearance in the literature of disability studies.

Conversely, *The Wonderful Visit*, one of Wells’s early works, offers an example of how his corpus might be read through the lens of literary and cultural disability studies and applied to the sociohistorical happenings during the time of publication. The text also shows how Wells brings a provocative, yet deeply personal, perspective to the characters and situations of those who are identified (perhaps hastily) as disabled. Additionally, Wells is often prescient in his depiction of bodies, which seems to disrupt the normative expectations of society and allows for my claim that Wells addresses some of the contemporary tenets of disability studies long before they are recognised by either Wells’s fellow writers or current disability studies scholars.⁵ *The Wonderful Visit* encourages just this kind of

¹ H. G. Wells, *The Wonderful Visit* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1914), 1. All citations from this edition.

² *Ibid.*, 2.

³ *Ibid.*, 222 and 212, respectively.

⁴ The term ‘normals’ comes from Erving Goffman who, in 1963, became one of the first social psychologists to examine closely the societal effects of stigmatisation on ‘an individual who [...] possesses a trait that can obtrude itself upon attention and turn those of us whom he meets away from him’. He clarifies that ‘We and those who do not depart negatively from the particular expectations at issue I shall call the normals’ (Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (New York: Touchstone, 2009), 5). I recognise that Goffman’s text, although considered by some to be canonical in disability studies, comes with its own set of issues; however, a discussion regarding these issues is beyond the scope of this current article.

⁵ This is not to say that other contemporary authors were not writing works with disabled characters; most notably, Wilkie Collins and Rudyard Kipling. Martha Stoddard Holmes points out that Collins was ‘one of the two most

consideration as it depicts instances of characters that are presumed to be disabled because of the conditions they display. The Angel, in his wounded innocence, is described with various types of impairment, physical and mental; however, Wells constructs the plot in such a way that the reader is left wondering who exactly is the person(s) identified as disabled. Despite this progressive leap, Wells's tendency to revert to a normative gaze troubles his overall consideration as an author who might serve as an early disability studies paladin. By this I mean that, even after offering a thorough example of how his characters identified as disabled are ostracised and oppressed by their society, he can think of no other ending for these characters than cure or elimination. Therefore, this article considers this predilection alongside his assumed liberal attitudes towards the strict binary of disability and ability, examining not only its impact on the text itself, but also on Wells's minimal appearance in conversations at the intersections of disability studies, science fiction, and Wellsian scholarship. In short, I argue that Wells's works open significant opportunities in both Wellsian and disability studies scholarship to re-envision perceptions of ability and difference in new and incisive ways.

Wells taunts death and whispers of Victorian notions of disability

This article will address two questions: why disability and why Wells? An initial response to the first question comes from disability studies scholars, with David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder contending:

Nearly every culture views disability in need of a solution, and this belief establishes one of the major modes of historical address directed toward people with disabilities. The necessity for developing various kinds of cultural accommodations to handle the 'problem' of corporal difference [...] situates people with disabilities in a profoundly ambivalent relationship to the cultures and stories they inhabit.⁶

In other words, the way those identified as disabled are represented historically in literature, as 'problem[s]' in need of fixing, is a contributing factor to the way they are then viewed and treated in the accompanying culture. This assumption holds true for the Victorian era as well; perhaps even more so because of an amalgam of several factors: the emergence of eugenics, the appearance of several characters that might be identified as disabled by contemporary readers, as well as several legislative resolutions.⁷ Add to these circumstances two other generation-defining moments – Max Nordau's *Degeneration* and Oscar Wilde's trial and conviction, both occurring in 1895 – and it becomes clearer as to how the question of ability and normality moves to the centre of cultural conversation.⁸ It is also important to note that, when discussing the term 'disability' in relation to the Victorian era, one obvious issue arises, as Jennifer Esmail and Christopher Keep point out: 'Victorians did not use the term disability as expansively as we use it today. Victorians would not have grouped together, in their

prolific producers of disabled characters in Victorian literature, along with his friend, colleague, collaborator, and competitor, Charles Dickens' (Martha Stoddard Holmes, *Fictions of Afflictions: Physical Disability in Victorian Culture* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004), 74).

⁶ David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependence of Discourse* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001), 47.

⁷ Such characters might include Dickens's Tiny Tim (1843), Collins's Miss Finch (1872), and Kipling's Blind Woman in his short story 'They' (1904). In their essay, Esmail and Keep note that 'A series of Poor Laws and Elementary Education Acts (1870, 1880, 1893, 1899) were among a number of legislative efforts to define ability in the wake of industrialization and imperial expansion' (Jennifer Esmail and Christopher Keep, 'Victorian Disability: Introduction', *Victorian Review* 35.2 (2009), 46). They also surmise that 'By the end of the century, the growth of eugenics fomented a new and intense scrutiny of "fitness" in physical and mental capabilities. Taken together, these cultural, governmental, and medical discourses helped to redefine the very meaning of ability, putting the body and its faculties at the very heart of a new bio-politics' (46). As for Wells's views on eugenics, as John Partington notes in his study, they were unfixed and complicated, resulting in an uneasy understanding by most modern scholars. Partington suggests that Wells disagreed with Francis Galton's ideas of creating 'an ideal type' of human, explaining that 'Galton strove for human perfection, whereas Wells declares that, "In a modern Utopia there will, indeed, be no perfection; in Utopia there must also be friction, conflicts and waste, but the waste will be enormously less than in our world' (John S. Partington, 'The Death of the Static: H. G. Wells and the Kinetic Utopia', *Utopian Studies* 11.2 (2000), 98).

⁸ Yoonjung Choi discusses at length the connection between Nordau's text, Wilde's trial, and Wells's *The Wonderful Visit* in 'The Wonderful Visit and the Wilde Trial', in *The Wellsian: The Journal of the H. G. Wells Society* 31 (2007): 45-55.

terminology, a blind person, a “mad” person, an “invalid”, a “cripple”, an “idiot”, and an individual with what we now call Down Syndrome [...] in the one discursive category of “disability”⁹ In any event, it is difficult to say with any certainty that Wells (or any other contemporary author) was writing a text about persons who identify or are identified as disabled because the field simply did not exist. However, this circumstance does not mean that discussions about the causes of disability and its treatment were not being addressed. Acknowledging this caveat is key not only to understanding Victorian concepts of disability as a whole, but also to understanding Wells and this project specifically. Put another way, although I posit that Wells anticipates current tenets of disability, he himself might quibble with my argument because he would not consider his characters ‘disabled’.

As for the second question (why Wells?), Esmail and Keep posit that ‘Developments in literary and cultural studies often offer new ways not only of reading familiar texts but also of bringing less well-known writers into a sharper focus and in so doing helping to expand our sense of the range and variety of cultural practice in a given period or national literature’.¹⁰ While Wells certainly does not qualify as a ‘less well-known writer’, many of his works do, including *The Wonderful Visit*. By revisiting this text under the umbrella of literary and cultural disability studies, we develop an appreciation of not only Wells’s particular views of health and illness, but also the views of his contemporaries.

To be sure, I do not claim that Wells’s contemporaries were not experimenting with disabled characters; I suggest that Wells’s approach was singular at this particular moment. To support this claim, I borrow from Mitchell and Snyder’s claim that, while disability in literature ‘recurs [...] as a potent force’ that reveals and reflects on the ‘cultural ideals of the “normal” or “whole” body’, it can also devolve into ‘a programmatic (even deterministic) identity’.¹¹ For example, Collins acknowledges in his 1872 dedication that his Miss Finch is not the first character identified as blind to appear in fiction; however, he claims that ‘blindness in these cases has been always exhibited, more or less exclusively, from the ideal and the sentimental point of view’.¹² Despite this claim, he continues to perceive Miss Finch’s vision differences as ‘affliction[s]’. Wells, on the other hand, places the ‘affliction’ on Dr Crump and the villagers as they slowly disable the Angel into a ‘crippled man’. This reversal signals not only a critical difference between Wells and his contemporaries, but also in the historical representations of disability during the late-Victorian age. Wells is also an especially intriguing source for early interactions between disability studies and Wellsian scholarship because he himself experienced disability, beginning with a near-fatal football accident in 1887. Wells described the incident succinctly, yet poignantly, in a correspondence to his close friend A. M. Davies: ‘I got smashed at football – inside broken – and my circumstances suddenly changed to a barely furnished bedroom, agonizing pains, life destroying haemorrhage [...]. I am a confirmed invalid for the rest of my days and I shan’t be glad when it is all over’.¹³ Despite the matter-of-factness of Wells’s words, the constant fear of disablement and an uncertain future lay over Wells for several years, so much that he, on his doctor’s advice, eventually moved from London into Spade House, a residence in which he fully intended to be ‘wheeled from room to room in a bath-chair’.¹⁴ Additionally, the long-term effects of Wells’s football accident led to sporadic episodes of life-threatening illness throughout his lifetime, as Patrick Parrinder points out in the introduction to Wells’s *Correspondences*, stating that Wells ‘was prone to influenza and bronchitis, and [...] [i]n his sixties he began to suffer from diabetes’.¹⁵

Wells’s correspondences and autobiography provide an uncensored glimpse at his at times life-threatening health as he experienced multiple stages of illness: questionable tuberculosis, recurrent pneumonia, severe renal failure, and brittle diabetes. Indeed, the years leading up to the publication of *The Wonderful Visit* were especially difficult for Wells in terms of his health. He writes about a particularly terrifying relapse that happened in 1893:

⁹ Esmail and Keep, 46.

¹⁰ Ibid., 49.

¹¹ Mitchell and Snyder, 50.

¹² Wilkie Collins, *Poor Miss Finch* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), xxxix.

¹³ *The Correspondence of H. G. Wells*, ed. David C. Smith (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1998), vol. 1, 66.

¹⁴ H. G. Wells, *Experiment in Autobiography: Discoveries and Conclusions of a Very Ordinary Brain (Since 1866)* (New York: Macmillan, 1934), 546.

¹⁵ Patrick Parrinder, ‘Introduction’, in *The Correspondence of H. G. Wells*, vol. 1, xiii-xiv.

I was seized by a fit of coughing. Once more I tasted blood and felt the dismay that had become associated with it and when I had got into the train I pulled out my handkerchief and found it stained brightly scarlet. I coughed alone in the dingy compartment and tried not to cough, sitting very still and telling myself it was nothing much [...]. At three o'clock in the morning I was trying for dear life not to cough. But this time the blood came and came and seemed resolved to choke me for good and all [...] the doctor hastily summoned and attention focused about a basin in which there was blood and blood and more blood [...] [that] stopped before I did. I was presently spread out under my ice-bags, still and hardly breathing, but alive.¹⁶

This account gives the reader a startling look into the intense fear Wells experiences from this relapse; in its entirety, this passage also reveals, amongst all the blood, Wells's panic about missing a lecture he was to give the following day and being (once again) without employment: 'It was unendurable to think that I was to have yet another relapse, that I should have to stop work again [...] I suppose I was extremely near death that night, but I remember only my irritation at the thought that this would prevent my giving a lecture I had engaged myself to give on the morrow'.¹⁷ In true Wellsian fashion, however, he eventually became so irritated with the whole dying business that he defied even death itself, as written ten years later in his short treatise 'How I Died': 'I quite forgot I was a Doomed Man [...]. "Oh! Death He's a Bore", I said'.¹⁸ In contemporary disability vernacular, these bouts of illness embody the concept of temporarily able-bodiedness (TAB), which declares that all of us are vulnerable to becoming disabled at any given moment. Cecilia Capuzzi Simon quips that disability activists call those not identified as disabled as 'TABS' and 'like to remind them that disability is a porous state; anyone can enter or leave at any time. Live long enough and you will most certainly enter it'.¹⁹ Conversely, Tory Pearman notes that 'The label is not without controversy [...] for it simplistically casts disability as *inevitable* instead of *possible*'.²⁰ Regardless, I would argue that, because of his own profoundly personal and thus intensely fraught experiences with TAB, we see Wells's own health concerns in his protagonists' darkest moments. It is in these moments that we also best hear the whisper of Wells's own fears about the precariousness of ability, a whisper that allows us to notice his conspicuous absence in conversations concerning the intersections of disability studies and Wellsian scholarship, especially when we see how Wells brilliantly presages both the medical and social models of disability in *The Wonderful Visit*.

Shrivelled wings: *The Wonderful Visit*'s disabling society

It is likely a fair assumption that most readers are not familiar with *The Wonderful Visit*, especially given its close proximity to Wells's most popular and lasting work, *The Time Machine* (1895). Although the novels were written essentially simultaneously, Michael Sherborne observes that 'If Wells had died in 1895, this one volume would have ensured him a place in literature'.²¹ Indeed, Sherborne continues, 'the playfully fantastic *Wonderful Visit* takes a less powerful hold on the reader than the grippingly

¹⁶ Wells, *Experiment*, 303-4.

¹⁷ Wells, *Experiment*, 304. Wells's concerns here are very valid; by this time, he had already lost several posts due to his recurring relapses and, as a result, he wrote at an extremely heightened pace. By 1895, several of Wells's friends and supporters, most notably publisher William Henley, were concerned with the stress of this abundant writing and the effects it might have on his health. On 5 May 1895, Henley wrote to Wells: 'For Heaven's sake, take care of yourself. You have an unique talent; and – you've published three books, at least, within the year, & are up to your elbows in a fourth [...]! When it is off your hands, you must take a rest'. Henley reassures Wells that he believes in his 'imagination' and 'future', but admits that Wells's frenzied writing 'really frighten[s]' (Henley to Wells, 5 May 1895, Box 16, Folder 15, H. G. Wells Papers 1845-1946, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Rare Books and Manuscript Library, University of Illinois Libraries).

¹⁸ H. G. Wells, 'How I Died', in *Certain Personal Matters* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1901), 184.

¹⁹ Cecilia Capuzzi Simon, 'Disability Studies', in *Beginning with Disability, a Primer*, ed. Lennard J. Davis (New York: Routledge, 2018), 301.

²⁰ Tory Pearman, 'Disability, Blood, Liminality in Malory's "Tale of the Sankgreal"', *Journal of Literal and Cultural Disability Studies* 10.3 (2016), 280.

²¹ Sherborne's remark is not to be taken lightly; given Wells's tenuous health at the time, it is quite possible that he might have died in 1895 (Michael Sherborne, *H. G. Wells: Another Kind of Life* (London: Peter Owen, 2012), 106). Jeremy Withers notes the prodigious output of Wells during this time, stating: 'In the early-1890s Wells dedicated himself to becoming a professional writer. In 1894, he sold more than 140 articles, stories, and reviews' (Jeremy Withers, 'Introduction', in H. G. Wells, *The Wheels of Chance* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2018), 3).

realistic *Time Machine*'.²² In any event, this charming yet deceptive social novel tells the story of an Angel literally shot out of the sky by the local Vicar, who dabbles in ornithology, and the ensuing episodes of armchair diagnosing, flagrant misunderstandings, and rampant hypothesising on the part of the villagers. In the course of the novel, Wells undertakes social commentary on such contentious issues as environmental ethics, autocracy, socialism, classism, imperialism, vivisection, and the New Woman movement, as well as the villagers' adamant disbelief that the Angel is indeed just that.

Hidden under all of this 'air [...] full of Social Movements' is a layer of contention that is frequently glossed over: the depiction of a person identified as disabled.²³ What is so intriguing for those interested in disability studies is Wells's anticipatory recognition of the social construction of disability and his early views of the medical model at work. Disability studies scholars often define the medical model by its goal: to treat and, if possible, cure impairments at any cost. As such, impairments – any type of condition that directly affects one's ability to conduct their activities of daily living – are often viewed as deficient, deviant, or defective. Additionally, the medical model considers impairment an individualised issue; in other words, the individual affected is identified as needing the treatment, not the systems in place, such as the architectural and social barriers that this person experiences. It is these barriers that disable an individual, not the impairment. Alice Hall identifies disability as '[t]he disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by a contemporary social organisation which takes no or little account of people who have physical impairments and thus excludes them from participation in the mainstream of social activities'.²⁴ In other words, a person may have an impairment that does not necessarily limit their functionality; however, when they are not afforded accessibility, their impairment becomes disabling. A common example of this misstep is a rampless building, which poses little adversity to those able to walk; however, for those who require a wheelchair, such buildings become inaccessible.

Given Wells's health issues up to this point, it is fair to say that he had much experience with both the medical model and the patient/physician relationship. In fact, Wells had an animated relationship with several of his own physicians. For example, Henry Hick, Wells's primary physician during the late 1890s (some of Wells's most uncertain days in terms of his longevity), was often invited for visits at the Wells household and vice versa. It was Hick who prescribed cycling, an activity Wells very much enjoyed, as exercise intended to strengthen his lungs. Unfortunately, after Wells experienced another near-death relapse in Hick's own home, he gave his bicycle 'to the Doctor chap here [Hick] in a sort of "appreciation" over & above his fees. He's a fine hand at diagnosis'.²⁵ It is fair to say that the Angel did not experience such a relationship with Dr Crump. Although there are multiple areas of disability to choose from in the novel, this article turns to two representations: the initial interchange between the Angel, the Vicar, and Crump, and the last few chapters. These areas offer a perplexing depiction of the medical model, or the 'problem' of the Angel's wings, as well as an example of how, as a result of the villagers' normative views, the Angel's presumed medical impairment dissolves into the social model, which 'emphasise[s] the public, structural aspects of disability and highlight[s] the status of people with disabilities as a historically oppressed group'.²⁶

To begin with the text proper, when Crump first examines the Angel's wings, he ponders on the cause of this 'abnormal growth', listing 'Spinal curvature [...]. Reduplication of the anterior limb – bifid coracoid [...]'. 'Curious integumentary simulation of feathers' as possible causes before finally surmising that the wings are a 'Curious malformation'.²⁷ He even admits that the 'simulation of feathers' are 'Almost avian', yet never admits that his patient is indeed an Angel and that his wings are natural.²⁸ Keeping in mind that the Angel is injured (shot by the Vicar), treatment is clearly needed; however,

²² Sherborne, 108.

²³ Wells, *The Wonderful Visit*, 69.

²⁴ Alice Hall, *Literature and Disability* (Abington: Routledge, 2016), 21.

²⁵ *Correspondence*, vol. 1, 322.

²⁶ Hall, 21. The Union of Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS), via Tom Shakespeare, adds this less diplomatic definition: 'In our view, it is society which disables physically impaired people. Disability is something imposed on top of our impairments, by the way we are unnecessarily isolated and excluded from full participation in society. Disabled people are therefore an oppressed group in society' (Tom Shakespeare, 'The Social Model of Disability', in *The Disability Studies Reader*, 4th edition, ed. Lennard Davis (New York: Routledge, 2013), 198).

²⁷ Wells, *Visit*, 50-1.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 50.

Crump lets the broken, bleeding, and bandaged humerus alone and sets to the task of removing the wings. His suggestions include treating the wings with iodine to flatten them or, possibly, merely sawing them off.²⁹ Here, I would argue, Wells not so subtly hints at what contemporary disability studies scholars identify as a problematic result of the medical model: the need to cure. Rather than accepting the Angel's wings as an essential part of his physical and functional design, Crump's first reaction is to 'cure' the condition by removing them. Conversely, the caricature of Crump is also paradoxical to the medical model. By this I mean that Crump never believes that the Angel is an angel but, by his own admission, believes that 'everything that is, is natural. There is nothing unnatural in this world'.³⁰ Here, Crump echoes Wells's comments in 'The Rediscovery of the Unique' where Wells insists that '*All being is unique*, or nothing, is strictly like anything else. It implies, therefore, that we only arrive at the idea of similar beings by an unconscious or deliberate disregard of an infinity of small differences [...]. And so in the smallest clod of earth and in the meanest things in life there is, if we care to see it, the unprecedented and unique [...] there is really nothing around us common and negligible'. Applied to the text, then, the Angel's wings are natural and unique, which raises the question: why is Crump (and, by default, Wells) so insistent on curing the Angel of these 'abnormal phenomena'?³¹ Additionally, in the novel, there is a clear difference between 'unnatural' and 'abnormal' as evidenced by Crump's next diagnosis: 'There are abnormal phenomena, of course [...]', then concluding that the Angel is a 'mattoid [...]. An abnormal man. [...] [A] type of degenerate'.³² This admission presents an interesting and realistic view of those considered to be disabled (or abnormal). The terms 'abnormal' and 'degenerate' are often applied to those under this umbrella. However, Lennard Davis explains that

the 'problem' is not the person with disabilities; the problem is the way that normalcy is constructed to create the 'problem' of the disabled person. A common assumption would be that some concept of the norm must have always existed [...]. But the idea of a norm is less a condition of human nature than it is a feature of a certain kind of society.³³

In other words, although normality cannot exist outside abnormality, Crump has a clear picture of what he considers to be normal, and the Angel's wings do not fit into that category. As a result, Crump, standing in for not only the medical model, but also the societal expectations of the villagers, accepts the version of the Angel he is most comfortable with – that of an abnormal man. From there, every other aspect of the Angel's nature comes into question, as evidenced by Crump's extrapolation of all sorts of possible symptoms, including the 'effeminate delicacy of his face', 'quite unmeaning laughter', 'neglected hair', and 'singular dress [...]. Marks of mental weakness'.³⁴ Crump goes as far as to postulate that the Angel has 'slipped away from confinement', and that either the police will come looking for him or his family and friends will post a missing person's advertisement, even though 'people may want to hush it up'.³⁵

As the story progresses, Crump becomes even more agitated, stating at one point: 'You are either one of two things – a lunatic at large (which I don't believe), or a knave. Nothing else is possible'.³⁶ This strict way of considering the Angel's 'disability' mirrors the more recent notion that a person can only be abled or disabled, that there is no fluidity in ability. Davis addresses this conundrum by explaining that 'The term "disability", as it is commonly and professionally used, is an absolute category without a level of threshold. One is either disabled or not. One cannot be a little disabled any more than one can be a little pregnant. [...] A concept with such a univalent stranglehold on meaning must contain

²⁹ Ibid., 51. Interestingly, Wells himself experienced iodine therapy in a different manner and detested it, as evidenced by a strongly worded letter to A. M. Davies: 'The idea of painting the human thorax with iodine is jesuitical devilment – in order to stop a chap congesting you dip him into hell & so disincline him to die. Iodine is a deadly serpent to take to one's breast –' (*Correspondence*, vol. 1, 70).

³⁰ Wells, 54.

³¹ Wells, 'A Rediscovery of the Unique', in *H. G. Wells: Early Writings in Science and Science Fiction*, ed. Robert M. Philmus and David Y. Hughes (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 23.

³² Wells, *Visit*, 54; 56-7.

³³ Lennard Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body* (London: Verso, 1995), 24.

³⁴ Wells, *Visit*, 57.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., 197-8.

within it a dark side of power, control, and fear'.³⁷ Put another way, by restricting our notions of what counts as an abled or disabled body/mind results in a power structure where one group not only represses the other but, as a result, controls crucial aspects of that other group's livelihood, such as health insurance, reproductive rights, citizenship, and so forth. By highlighting Crump's inflexibility towards the Angel's wings, Wells also directs his contemporaries to some of these same issues happening around them. The reader is privy to each character's thoughts and the entire plot, and sees the ridiculousness of Crump's rigidity concerning 'what' the Angel is; however, the Angel encapsulates the villagers' uncomfortableness with him succinctly in this response: 'It's impossible for you to know who I am. Your eyes are blind, your ears deaf, your soul dark, to all that is wonderful about me'.³⁸

An argument may be made here that this exchange highlights Wells's doing what he does best: challenging the 'infinite complacency' of his fellows.³⁹ Before we give Wells too much credit, though, this stubborn resistance to the Angel might also be considered as a reversal in his progressive views of disability mentioned earlier in this article. While he is at once dynamic in not considering the wings (or the Angel) 'abnormal', he still desires to cure the Angel of his 'abnormalities' and, if he cannot, the character identified as disabled must go and that is exactly what happens. Despite all the evidence placed before them, the villagers (even though some are clearly impaired themselves) are simply incapable of accepting the Angel's presence. Two of these characters reside in Lumpy Durgan, 'the half-wit', and the 'trifle deaf' Lady Hammergeallow who uses a 'speaking trumpet' to enhance her hearing.⁴⁰ The use of 'impaired' here is intentional. Wells allows these two characters to live within the village relatively unbothered; in other words, there is very little about the social environment that disables them. The fact that these characters remain unexamined by Wells offers yet another layer of complexity to his ambiguous representation of disabled characters. By this I mean that Wells is content to leave the two individuals to their own devices, yet the Angel's differences seem excessive for Wells and, thus, need to be cured. As 'medical adviser to this parish', Crump is happy to oblige, telling the Angel: 'you are an unhealthy influence. We can't have you. You must go'.⁴¹ Wells's ambivalence here troubles my claim of his progressiveness for two reasons. First, despite the advancement Wells makes in recognising what is real as natural, he reverts to his normative stance when the only options he offers for the Angel are either to accept the cure Crump proposes or to leave the village. The second worry is that of Wells's use of the Angel as a plot device, what Mitchell and Snyder refer to as a 'narrative prosthesis'.⁴²

According to Mitchell and Snyder, a narrative prosthesis 'centers not simply upon the fact that people with disabilities have been the object of representational treatments, but rather that their function in literary discourse is primarily twofold: disability pervades literary narrative, first, as a stock feature of characterization and, second, as an opportunistic metaphorical device'.⁴³ In this article, I am concerned with the latter function, the 'stock feature of characterization', and what Mitchell and Snyder refer to as the 'simple schematic of narrative structure'.⁴⁴ To summarise, in a narrative containing a disabled character, four phases typically occur: first, a 'deviance' is introduced to the reader; second, the 'deviance' (or reason for) is explained; third, the 'deviance' or, in this case, the disabled character becomes the driving force behind the narrative; and, fourth, the 'deviance' must either be rescued, cured, exterminated, or revalued by the end of the text.⁴⁵ Wells's plot follows this schema almost perfectly: the reader is introduced to the deviance (the Angel's wings), this deviance becomes central to the plot, and then, as addressed below, the deviance is somehow removed from the story. Additionally, even though Crump and the other villagers never acknowledge the Angel's wings as wings, for most readers, the

³⁷ Lennard Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body* (London: Verso, 1995), 1.

³⁸ Wells, *Visit*, 197.

³⁹ Wells used his writing, be it (science) fiction or non-fiction, as a tool to promote social and political change. Frank McConnell notes that 'if we wish to regard science fiction seriously as a sociological form, we have to remember that Wells, more than any other writer in the genre, tried to harness the powers of narrative to the great task of social change and man's salvation' (Frank McConnell, *The Science Fiction of H. G. Wells* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 6).

⁴⁰ Wells, *Visit*, 2 and 124, respectively.

⁴¹ Wells, *Visit*, 203-4.

⁴² Mitchell and Snyder, 49.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

reason for the 'deviance' is clear: he is truly an Angel. Despite this adherence to a modern schema, Wells still troubles Mitchell and Snyder's theory; although they claim that 'stories rely upon the potency of disability as a symbolic figure, they rarely take up disability as an experience of social or political dimensions'.⁴⁶ Within the Angel, Wells is clearly exploring the social and political 'dimensions' of the late-Victorian issues listed above (the New Woman, socialism, imperialism). This prosthetic use of the Angel may be an intended extrapolation of the concept of narrative prosthesis and, although Wells may not agree that his characters are 'disabled', the possibility that Wells intentionally disabled his mouthpiece in order to delineate the social and political unrest he witnessed around him is quite plausible.

'It is dark, it is cold [and] I cannot use my wings': The disabling of an Angel⁴⁷

While we have not discussed the Vicar until this point, he plays an important role in the novel. Although one might be tempted to include the 'waiting maid' Delia as a believer in the Angel, she never actually accepts his wings as the source of his anguish.⁴⁸ When the Angel agonises to her that he cannot use his wings anymore, 'Delia did not understand, but she realised that it was something very dreadful', and when he reaches out to her, she responds: 'I do not know [...] but I am sorry. I am sorry for you, with all my heart'.⁴⁹ Her heartfelt reaction is one of pity, more than the Angel received from any other villager, including the Vicar, but she still does not accept the realness of the Angel's wings (or his disability). Conversely, as the one character that believes that the Angel is indeed an angel, the Vicar is, arguably, marginalised nearly as much as the Angel. There is one crucial difference, though: in the end, he conforms to the village's social standard of normality, albeit at a great cost. Certainly, he takes this step with great angst, bemoaning that 'Here is an Angel, a glorious Angel, who has quickened my soul to beauty and delight [...] and I have promised to get rid of him in a week! What are we men made of?'⁵⁰ With this passionate resignation, the Vicar participates in disabling the Angel who, in facing the constant doubt and ceaseless denunciation from the villagers, eventually breaks, as evidenced by this poignant passage:

The Angel lay with his crippled, shrivelled wings humped upon his back, watching the gulls and jackdaws and rooks, circling in the sunlight, soaring, eddying, sweeping down to the water or upward into the dazzling blue of the sky. Long the Angel lay there and watched them going to and fro on outspread wings. He watched, and as he watched them he remembered with infinite longing the rivers of starlight and the sweetness of the land from which he came [...]. And suddenly a shadow came into the Angel's eyes, the sunlight left them, he thought of his own crippled pinions, and put his face upon his arm and wept.⁵¹

In the above passage, as the Angel watches the birds in the air do what he is no longer able to do, he realises that he is 'crippled' by this 'strange world' and experiences immeasurable grief. This short chapter also acts as a mirror for the reader into Wells's own distress surrounding his recurring health issues. He writes in 'How I Died':

I was full of the vast ambition of youth; I was still at the age when death is quite out of sight, when life is still an interminable vista of years; and then suddenly, with a gout of blood upon my knuckle, with a queer familiar taste in my mouth, that cough which had been a bother became a tragedy, and this world that had been so solid grew faint and thin. I saw through it; saw [Death's] face near to my own; suddenly found him beside me, when I had been dreaming he was far beyond there, far away over the hills.⁵²

The appearance of blood on his knuckles is frightening enough to encourage Wells to consider his own mortality at a point in his life that he insists his longevity should not be questioned. Conversely, the crippling of his wings and the resultant inability to fly cause the Angel a similar amount of physical and

⁴⁶ Ibid., 47.

⁴⁷ Wells, *Visit*, 222.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 150.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 222.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 208.

⁵¹ Ibid., 211-12.

⁵² Wells, 'How I Died', 182-4.

mental angst, as evidenced not only in the above episode, but also in an exchange with Delia later in the text:

He began taking short runs, flapping his wings and leaping [...]. Delia watched him in amazement. He gave a despondent cry, leaping higher. His shrivelled wings flashed and fell [...]. He seemed to spring five or six feet from the ground and fall clumsily [...]. The Angel still lay upon the lawn, and sobbed for utter wretchedness [...]. 'It is dark, it is cold [and] I cannot use my wings'.⁵³

Recalling Alice Hall's definition of 'disability', we can see the literal disabling of the Angel as the result of trying to conform to this 'strange world'.⁵⁴ Even though the reader recognises that the Angel's wings are indeed just that and not a physical impairment, they cause the villagers great discomfort and distress, and the Angel must hide them, unused, throughout his 'visit', resulting in his inability to fly, which, in essence, disables him. As the passage above indicates, the Angel not only has been cured of his impairment (he can no longer fly), but he has also devolved from a celestial being to a mere mortal.

Additionally, unbeknownst to the Angel, a woman comes upon him as he lies sobbing; however, she does not offer him any solace or enquire about his needs. Instead, she sees only 'a twisted hunchback [...] sprawling foolishly [...] with his forehead on his arm'.⁵⁵ Thinking at first that he is merely sleeping, she moves closer to wake 'the silly creature', and, seeing his shaking shoulders and hearing his weeping, pauses: 'She stood still for a minute, and her features twitched into a kind of grin. Then treading softly she turned and went back towards the pathway', admitting that ''Tis so hard to think of anything to say [...]. Poor afflicted soul!'⁵⁶ The quick remark that the woman 'kind of grin(ned)' as she gazed upon the Angel is unsettling in terms of the social model. If the premise of the social model holds, the woman's actions highlight a significant concern that the disability studies scholar Michael Bérubé elucidates: 'it doesn't really matter whether anyone thinks of disability as a sideshow. The subject will be central to human existence for as long as humans have bodies – and embodied minds to theorize them with'.⁵⁷ Bérubé holds to the idea that there will not (or cannot) be a world in which impairment does not require cure and disability is not considered something to be eradicated, as long as our bodies (and minds) are different and there are humans to notice this difference. Put another way, even when attention does turn towards the barriers in the architectural and political arenas, this alone does not alleviate the compulsory able-bodiedness embraced by the humans in the novel. The woman's lack of action highlights Bérubé's concerns: instead of reaching out to the Angel in compassion and concern, the woman merely turns away, leaving the Angel in his misery. It is, of course, impossible to claim that Wells's 'kind of grin' indicates his awareness of this (human) complication to disability studies; however, it is a provocative interpretation to consider.

Conclusion: 'the opening and shutting of a door'⁵⁸

When the 'Strange bird' arrives on the chorus of singing children and the 'throbbing of harp strings', the narrator remarks that the music 'began and ended like the opening and shutting of a door'.⁵⁹ In the time it takes to shut that door, the Angel not only goes from celestial being to 'Strange bird', but also metamorphoses from a being with a full use of his glorious capacities to a socially, emotionally, and physically disabled human. Throughout the novel, though, the reader is left wondering exactly who Wells believes to be disabled: the Angel (because of his wings) or the villagers (because of their refusal to accept anything outside their narrow views). Additionally, if the reader is familiar with Wells's own deeply personal depictions of his life-threatening illnesses, the heart-wrenching descriptions of the Angel's disablement allows the reader to connect these descriptions under the umbrella of disability studies and create an entirely new way of considering not only *The Wonderful Visit*, but also many of Wells's other texts. Given these factors, one might be inclined to pronounce Wells a paladin of early

⁵³ Wells, *Visit*, 220-2.

⁵⁴ Hall, 21.

⁵⁵ Wells, *Visit*, 211.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 211-12.

⁵⁷ Michael Bérubé, 'Foreword: Side Shows and Back Bends', in *Bending over Backwards: Disability, Dismodernism & Other Difficult Positions*, ed. Lennard Davis (New York: New York University Press, 2002), x.

⁵⁸ Wells, *Visit*, 2.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

disability studies and wonder why Wells is not recognised as such by either Wellsian or disability studies scholars. One obvious reason, as Esmail and Keep remind us, is the absence of the field of disability studies in the late-Victorian era. Put another way, the Angel's wings would not be a presumed impairment or labelled as a disability in the sociohistorical environment Wells inhabited when he was writing *The Wonderful Visit*. Another inconspicuous reason is that, despite his progressive leaps, Wells insists on 'curing' the Angel and removing him from the world of the story, following closely the steps Mitchell and Snyder lay out in their schema of 'narrative structure'. This last interpretation is only available when the reader is familiar with both Wellsian and disability studies scholarship. Thus, this article concludes with the assertion that, in considering Wells's vast *oeuvre* as a vital addition to any work involving this intersection, scholars of both Wells and disability studies can conceive new ways of re-envisioning perceptions of ability and difference in not only Wells's work, but also in the work of his contemporaries, and the time periods in which he wrote, ensuring that Wells's substantial influence remains transparent and intact.

As for the Angel, in the end, he 'dies'. Recalling Mitchell and Snyder's narrative schema, the Angel's fate falls under the last step, that of removing the 'deviance' from the story. In the Angel's case, he is exterminated as a way to 'purif[y] the social body' of the village.⁶⁰ In other words, the villagers can continue being unbothered by their narrow-minded views and expectations of normalcy, as the 'social body' of the village has been purified and returned to its original state. Lest we forget, there are two other victims of the villagers' adamant refusal to accept the Angel's difference: Delia and the Vicar. We see the effects on the vicar from the loss of the Angel and his role in the Angel's disablement, through the 'mouth of Mrs. Mendham' as she and the narrator come across his burial site in the churchyard: 'I never saw a man so changed [...]. He had the queerest delusions about the Angels and that kind of thing [...]. He died within a twelvemonth of the fire'.⁶¹ Delia presumably dies in the same fire as the Angel; yet, because of Wells's brilliant narration, the question of whether the Angel and Delia actually die becomes problematical. When the Angel runs into the burning house to save Delia, who has returned to the house to save the Angel's 'fiddle', he is not successful in that he and Delia do not emerge from the house.⁶² The reader anticipates the death of both characters; however, as the Angel enters the vicarage, he is 'hidden by something massive [...] that fell, incandescent, across the doorway. There was a cry of "Delia" and no more'.⁶³ As he and Delia 'die', all of the villagers see 'a blinding glare that shot upward to an immense height, a blinding brilliance broken by a thousand flickering gleams like the waving of swords', and hear 'a rush of music, like the swell of an organ, [weaving] into the roaring of the flames', an exit very much like the entrance of the Angel at the beginning of the novel.⁶⁴ This exit encourages the reader's hope that the Angel and Delia did not in fact 'die'; rather, they transcended to the place whence the Angel originated. This interpretation is a much more promising perspective than Mitchell and Snyder's 'extermination' scenario, which offers one more way whereby Wells distorts the representation of disability in *The Wonderful Visit*. Incidentally, even after the fire and resultant deaths, Crump continues with the 'extermination' of the Angel, as 'little Hetty Penzance [...] talked of Angels and rainbow colours and golden wings, and was for ever singing an unmeaning fragment of an air that nobody knew', which Crump happily cures.⁶⁵

⁶⁰ Mitchell and Snyder, 53.

⁶¹ Wells, *Visit*, 243; 245.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 244.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 239.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 240.