### The War of the Worlds

H.G. Wells

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**About the author**

H.G. Wells was born in England in 1866. After a number of unsuccessful years working in a shop, he left work to study biology in 1883. He later became a teacher, but he was not suited to this work either and so decided to become a full-time writer in 1893. His first novel, *The Time Machine*, was published in 1895. In it, Wells criticizes British society and warns that human progress is not inevitable. His next novels, *The Island of Dr Moreau* (1896), *The Invisible Man* (1897), and *The War of the Worlds* (1898), all question the relationship between man and science and are regarded as science fiction classics. Wells used his position as a well known and popular author to try to change society for the better. After the First World War (1914–18) Wells became increasingly involved in politics at an international level. He worked for the League of Nations – an organization whose main objective was to prevent another war on the scale of the last. He met with important leaders, including Lenin, and worked in the Labour party in Britain. His high profile political career continued through the next decades until his death in 1946. Wells lived through the Second World War in his house in central London, refusing to let the war force him from his home.

**Summary**

*The War of the Worlds* is one of the most important science fiction classics of all time. It tells the story of Martians arriving on Earth with a plan to destroy human life and make the planet their own. The story is reported directly by a survivor of the Martian war – a writer, whose name we never learn. One summer night, at the end of the nineteenth century, a strange cylinder falls to Earth near the English town of Woking. Few people are interested at first, but then the end of the cylinder unscrews and a strange, grey creature – a Martian – emerges. Within minutes the Martians are attacking people with rays of heat, which destroy everything in their path. When the Martians start moving towards London and the news spreads, the population panics. Within days there are six million refugees fighting to escape London. Thousands of people are being killed every day and the Martians are only becoming stronger.

Just when things seem most desperate, the writer discovers that the Martians are being killed by Earth’s germs. Against the odds he is reunited with his wife and left to reflect upon the huge influence that the war has had upon humankind.

**Chapters 1–2:** Although the people of Earth do not know it, they are being watched by Mars. Mars, a planet that is older than Earth, is also growing colder with age, and the Martians want to come to Earth to live. The Martians fire missiles at Earth as they begin the first stage of their attack. The writer of the story says one night he went to the house of Ogilvy, an astronomer, and saw a flash on Mars through a telescope. It was a second missile that the Martians had fired. A few nights later Ogilvy sees what he thinks is a meteorite falling on Horsell Common and he goes out to investigate. He discovers an enormous cylinder in a pit, and he realizes that it is hollow and that there may be someone inside. Ogilvy tells a journalist and soon a great crowd of people comes to see the strange object.

**Chapters 3–4:** The cylinder opens and the Martians appear. Their tentacles give them the appearance of snakes, and their round, dark bodies are similar to the bodies of bears. The crowd is afraid and runs away but later that night people come back to look again. Suddenly, an invisible ray from a round object above the pit sets men and trees on fire. The writer runs away. In the pit the Martians are making machines equipped with these Heat-Rays. A second cylinder falls nearby in Woking. The Army arrives and begins to shoot field guns against the two cylinders. The writer, his wife and servant, leave their house and go to the village of Leatherhead. However, most people in England do not realize the danger and continue to live as usual.

**Chapters 5–6:** After leaving his wife and servant in Leatherhead the writer returns to his house. As he comes to his village the writer sees a flash of light, it is the third Martian cylinder that has landed on Earth. Then he...
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sees two enormous tripods that are walking toward the third cylinder. The writer meets a soldier who tells him that the Army field gun team had been destroyed by the Heat-Ray from the Martians’ tripod. The writer and the soldier decide to go north to London to escape from the Martians. They arrive at the River Thames where an excited crowd is trying to cross the water. Suddenly several Martian tripods appear. The writer escapes in a boat and meets a curate, who is confused by the destruction. Together they continue toward London.

Chapters 7–8: The writer’s younger brother lives in London. During the weekend, reports about the Martians have come slowly to the city. The writer’s brother is very worried about his brother and his family. On Monday morning there is panic in the streets. People say that the Martians are coming with a Black Smoke that poisons and kills. The writer sees the Martians using the Black Smoke as they approach London. The Martians use the Black Smoke when they cannot see who they are fighting; otherwise they use the Heat-Ray.

Chapters 9–10: The government tells the people of London to leave the city. Six million people leave the capital. Many go to the east coast of England to take a boat to the Continent. The writer’s brother meets two women whom he helps and they get on a steamboat. The Thunder Child, an English warship, attacks three Martian tripods that appear on the coast. The Martians use Black Smoke and the Heat-Ray against the warship, but the Thunder Child knocks down two tripods. The warship explodes as the steamboat with the writer and the two women on board escapes.

Chapters 11–12: The writer and the curate hide in a house to escape the Black Smoke. They leave the house when it is safe and then they see Martians picking people up and putting them in a large metal box. The writer and the curate hide from the Martians in another house. A fifth cylinder from Mars falls upon the house next to where they are and creates a huge pit in the ground. The writer watches the Martians as they work in the pit. The increased gravity on Earth makes it difficult for the Martians to move their, round bodies. The writer believes that the Martians can exchange thoughts. He argues with the curate as they continue to hide in the house, which was almost destroyed by the explosion of the fifth cylinder when it struck the house next to them. He discovers that the Martians are killing human beings and drinking their blood. The curate goes mad and the writer kills him during a fight. A Martian hears the fight, takes away the body of the curate and all the food in the house but does not find the writer. After many days without eating, the writer leaves the house. Outside there are many houses in ruins and dead bodies of human beings.

Chapters 13–15: The writer meets the soldier he had met at his house earlier. The soldier tells the writer that the Martians are building flying machines and that they will defeat the people of Earth. The soldier says that some people will fight the Martians and others will not. The soldier believes that there are two kinds of human beings, the strong and the weak, and that only the strong will survive. The soldier shows the writer his plans to fight the Martians, but the writer realizes that the soldier is just a dreamer, and not willing to do the hard work necessary to defeat the Martians. The writer leaves and goes to London. In the city many houses are destroyed and there are a lot of dead people, but there are also dead Martians. The Martians have died of germs, which do not exist on Mars. The writer is taken care of by kind people and when he is well he returns to his house, where he finds that his wife is still alive.

Background and themes

The War of the Worlds is set in and around London at the end of the nineteenth century. At this time, Britain was the most powerful country in the world. It had made great advances in trade and science in the Victorian era and people felt confident and optimistic about the future.

Scientific progress: In The War of the Worlds, Wells warns the reader against such complacency. He urges that advances in scientific understanding should not be taken for granted, and predicts the negative effect upon society that technological advances might have if they are not used responsibly or intelligently.

Future scientific inventions: When The War of the Worlds was written, wars were fought between men on the ground. But Wells depicts the horrors of a war fought with giant fighting machines, flying machines and chemical weapons. Less than twenty years later these horrors became reality when Europe was ripped apart by the First World War (1914–18). Sometimes called the ‘first modern war’, the First World War used tanks, aeroplanes and chemical weapons with disastrous effects on both sides.
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Fight for survival: As well as the science of war, Wells considers the effects of such large-scale destruction upon society. When men are forced to fight for survival, society breaks down. The book’s description of the panic that sweeps through London, as people steal and fight to save their own lives, is frightening because it is realistic. But amongst the chaos, Wells portrays individual acts of kindness and bravery. The book tells us that human beings have the potential to be good if they try.

Discussion activities

Before reading

1 Discuss: *The War of the Worlds* is one of the most famous science fiction stories of all time. Ask the class to give you names of other famous science fiction stories from literature, film or television. Students then work in pairs to write a short description of a famous science fiction story – but without mentioning the title or main character. Each pair then reads their description out loud and the rest of the class tries to guess the title of the story.

2 Research: Using available books and the Internet students look for the latest information regarding the possibility of intelligent life in the universe and, more specifically, the possibility of life on Mars. Each student writes down the most interesting piece of information discovered and reads it to the class.

Introduction

Before reading

3 Discuss: Ask students: What kind of books do you like reading? Have you read science fiction before? What authors have you read? Do you think that H.G. Wells, who wrote this novel more than a hundred years ago, will be as interesting as a modern writer?

4 In 1938, Orson Welles’s radio broadcast of *The War of the Worlds* had an unexpected effect on its listeners. Ask the students if they know about it. If not, can they guess what happened? After you have solicited the students’ ideas, ask them to read the Introduction (pages v–vii). Did anyone guess correctly? Could the same thing happen today? Why/why not?

5 Discuss: Ask students to read the first two sentences in italics at the beginning of the Introduction. Then say to students: *All the Martian cylinders land in England. Why do you think that the Martians chose that country? What country would they choose today?*

Chapters 1–2

After reading

6 Discuss: Ask students to look up the word ‘complacency’ in their dictionaries. Then ask students: Why do you think that people in England did not believe in threats from other planets at the end of the nineteenth century? Do people still feel as safe today as when the novel was written?

7 Role play: In pairs. Students take the roles of the writer and Ogilvy as they look through the telescope at Mars and see a flash on the planet. Students are encouraged to see more than is reported in the story.

8 Write: Students write a newspaper paragraph with information about the arrival of the cylinder on Horsell Common. Who, what, where, when, are questions that need to be answered. Ask students to think of a headline that will get readers’ attention. Students read out their headlines to the class.

Chapters 3–4

Before reading

9 Predict with artwork: Have students read the title to Chapter 3, *The Cylinder Opens*. Ask them to imagine what the Martians will look like and draw a picture. Students will then show their pictures to the class and name the various parts of the body. Students will vote for the picture they think is most ‘Martian.’ Be sure to tell students that the cover picture is not that of the Martians, but of their machines.

After reading

10 Write: Chapter 2 begins with the main character sitting in his comfortable English home and writing in his study. By the end of Chapter 3 he is alone on a blackened common and running for his life. In pairs, students write a different story but they must start and end with these key scenes. Walk round the class and help students as they write. Finally, choose some of the students to read out their stories to the rest of the class.

11 Check predictions with artwork: Ask students to compare Wells description of the Martians on pages 8–9 with the pictures they have drawn. Students can draw a picture of the Martians according to Wells’s description. Then ask them whose description they prefer, that of Wells or that of the artwork they voted for.

12 Role play: Tell students that on page 13 there are arguments that Ogilvy made against the possibility of the Martians capturing the Earth. There are also objections to his argument. Put the students into pairs, one taking the role of Ogilvy, the other the role of the writer. They have an argument for and against the possibility of the Martians capturing the Earth. They should also make up new arguments. Students will judge who has made the most convincing argument.
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Chapters 5–6
After reading
13 Write: In these chapters, the main character makes several important decisions which save his life. Ask students to work in small groups and make a list of these decisions and actions. Finally, ask each of the groups in turn to read out one item on their list. Encourage classroom discussion of each item and draw the students’ attention to the similarities and differences between the groups’ lists.

14 Artwork and discuss: The description of the tripod is on page 18. Have students draw a picture of the tripod and then ask them: Why do you think that readers at the end of the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth century would think that the tripod is so horrible? Are there any similarities with contemporary conceptions of machines and beings from outer space, such as Darth Vader?

15 Role play: Tell students: You will take the roles of the soldier that the writer meets and a newspaper reporter. The reporter asks the soldier about what happened to the field gun team. The soldier tells the reporter the information that is in the first full paragraph on page 21. The reporter also asks the soldier what he thinks will happen. The soldier will try to predict what will happen to the Martians. Listen to the pairs as they speak and help with pronunciation and intonation.

16 Role play: Put students into pairs. Student A is the curate who does not understand what is happening and asks the Martian, ‘What does it mean?’ Student B is a Martian and gives an explanation of why they have come to Earth and are destroying buildings and killing people.

Chapters 7–9
After reading
17 Discuss: When people are in extreme difficulty or danger they act in ways which they would not usually. Ask students to find examples from these three chapters. Can they think of any other examples from their own experiences or from true stories they have heard? Finally ask the class if they think that people act better or worse under such circumstances. What is the most popular viewpoint?

18 Write: Have students look up ‘declaration’ and ‘martial law’ in their dictionaries. Tell students: You are the Prime Minister and you have decided to declare martial law in London. You must write a declaration to the citizens of London telling them what they can and cannot do. Students read their declarations of martial law to the class and then vote on most convincing example.

19 Write: Tell students: You are the writer’s brother and you are going to send a telegram telling your brother what is happening in London. But there are two conditions, you don’t have very much money and you don’t want to alarm your brother. So, your telegram must be short, informative, and optimistic. Students vote on the most amusing telegram. (There is the possibility of humorous telegrams because of the contrast between the conditions in London and the need to be optimistic.)

20 Research and debate: Remind students that Wells’s stories predicted many future scientific inventions. One of them is the ‘Black Smoke.’ Have students use the library or Internet to research the mustard gas used in the First World War. Topics include: The effects of poison gas; which country first used poison gas in the war; if more than one country used it; whether it was considered illegal according to the rules of war, and why. With the saying ‘All’s fair in love and war’ as a debatable theme, and the history of nuclear and biological weapons as a backdrop, students can debate the morality of the use of poison gas.

Chapters 10–12
Before reading
21 Guess: Ask students to guess what the title of the chapter, The Thunder Child, might mean. Each student will explain what it could be and how it will affect the story.

22 Guess: The beginning of Chapter 10 says that the Martians could have killed the whole population of London on Monday. But they did not. Ask students to guess why the Martians did not and what they think the Martians are going to do.

After reading
23 Write: Students take the point of view of either the brother of the writer or Mrs Elphinstone. The brother writes a letter to the writer describing the two women, and how he feels about them. The two women write a letter to the doctor, Mrs Elphinstone’s husband who is also the young woman’s brother, describing the writer’s brother and how they feel about him, and perhaps how they feel about each other. Choose one or two of the best letters to be read to class.

Chapters 11–12
24 The curate is frightened and he is going mad. As a result, the writer kills him to save his own life. Why does the writer kill the curate? Did he want to kill him, do you think? Was he right? Students work individually or in small groups. Ask them to think of ways in which the writer could have prevented the killing from happening.
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25 **Artwork:** Have students read the description of the Martians on pages 54–55. Then tell them they are to make a mask of a Martian, according to the description they have read, or, if they prefer, as they imagine the Martians to be. After having made the masks the students, in pairs, write and perform a dialogue in front of the class about why they came to Earth and what they think about human beings. Encourage students to use their bodies to communicate and, if you and they wish, to imitate the howling sounds that are mentioned on page 35.

26 **Check:** Check if any students correctly guessed the Martians’ intentions in activity 22. Then, ask students to discuss whether the Martians are similar to carnivorous human beings. Could planet Earth then be considered an enormous farm that would supply the Martians with food? Would that be a morally acceptable explanation for their behaviour? Are there any parallels in human history?

27 **Research:** Have students look up ‘earthling’ in their dictionaries. Ask students: Why are the Martians heavier on Earth than they are on Mars? If Earthlings, a delightful word generally only found in science fiction, went to each of the planets in the solar system, would they be lighter or heavier? Have students discuss and answer these questions in class, and before the next class they should find out through the library or Internet if they were correct. Answers can be corroborated in the following class.

28 **Research, discuss:** Have students research telepathy on the Internet. Possible questions to be answered are: Do scientists believe that telepathy exists? If so, what kind of communication is possible with telepathy? Have there been famous cases of telepathy? Is it possible to develop telepathic powers? Do certain cultures believe and practise telepathy? Students then discuss the theme, ‘If telepathy exists, what are its possible consequences?’

29 **Debate:** At the end of the war the writer is put on trial for the murder of the curate. Students can take the roles of the writer, his lawyer, the prosecution, and the judge. Other possible roles include the ghost of the curate, the dog, and the Martian. The other students will be the jury and according to the arguments made by the defence and the prosecution, they will decide the innocence or guilt of the writer.

**Chapters 13–15**

**Before reading**

30 **Predict:** Ask students: What will be the conclusion of the book? Will the Earthlings finally defeat the Martians? What will happen to the writer’s brother and the two women? Will the writer find his wife? Are there any other questions that can be answered about the conclusion?

**After reading**

31 **Check:** Have students check their predictions in activity 30. Ask students: Are you satisfied with the ending? Were all your questions answered concerning what happened? Were there any clues earlier in the novel about how the novel would end?

32 **Discuss:** Ask the class to think about the soldier’s plan to survive under the Martians. Is it a good plan or not? Solicit different opinions from the students. Next, put the students into groups and tell them that they are living in a world where the Martians cannot be defeated. Each group must work out a plan for survival. Finally, the groups present their ideas to the rest of the class.

33 **Write:** Tell students: If the germs had not killed the Martians, how do you imagine The War of the Worlds would have ended? Each student writes a new ending for the novel, with the possibility that either the Martians or the Earthlings are victorious, or perhaps there will be a completely different alternative! Students can read their ending to the class.

34 **Write and sing:** Students write their own lyrics to the narrator’s crazy song, ‘The Last Man in the World’ (or ‘The Last Woman in the World’). The music to the song can be original or from a favourite song.

35 **Role play:** Students work in pairs. Ask them to prepare and then act out the following conversation: Student A: You are the writer. It is the first time that you have seen your wife since the war. Is she all right? How did she survive? What happened to her? Ask her questions and answer any questions she has about you, too. Student B: You are the writer’s wife. You thought your husband was dead but now he has arrived home. Ask him questions about the war. What happened to him and what did he see? Answer any questions he has about you, too.

**Extra activities**

36 **Discuss:** What is the greatest threat to human beings today? Ask the class to think about this question and then prompt different students to give their answers and their reasons. They should think about issues such as the destruction of the world’s natural environment, the economic imbalance between countries, incurable diseases, etc. as well as the threat of war from other countries (or other planets!).

37 **Discuss:** The writer mentions some possible ways of avoiding future attacks from Martians. Can you think of some ideas from today’s world which might help? What are they, and how could they be used against the Martians in this book?

**Vocabulary activities**

For the Word List and vocabulary activities, go to www.penguinreaders.com.