

# The War of the Worlds

## 10 Things You Didn't Know

<https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-War-of-the-Worlds/things-you-didnt-know/>

H.G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds* began a legacy of science fiction novels that discussed the potential of extraterrestrial invasion and shaped both society's fear of and fascination with alien life. First serialized in 1897 in *Pearson's Magazine*, the novel describes the chaos that ensues after an alien species makes contact with humankind, landing a spaceship outside Surrey, England. The aliens, much to the chagrin of Earth's inhabitants, do not seek diplomacy; rather, they engage humans in total war—a theme that would be eerily reflected over the course of the 20th century's two world wars.

*The War of the Worlds* was written when European powers—Britain, in particular—had invaded and colonized vast areas of the globe. The novel can be read as a meditation on the devastating effects advanced technology can have on an established society. Wells shows readers an Earth completely unprepared for the technological marvels of the Martian invaders—and one with no ability to adequately defend itself. *The War of the Worlds* serves as both an exciting and groundbreaking science fiction novel, as well as a work of colonial invasion literature.

### 1. *The War of the Worlds* predicted the use of chemical weapons in World War I.

Although *The War of the Worlds* predates the onset of World War I by nearly two decades, scholars have noted the accuracy with which Wells predicted advances in weapons technology. The "[Black Smoke](#)" used by the alien invaders became a reality during World War I, in which gas attacks became commonplace. Oftentimes, toxic gases would be released into trenches during combat with devastating effects. Just as Wells's Black Smoke is used to kill off humans en masse, the chemical weapons of World War I could wipe out entire units of soldiers, causing an excruciatingly painful death of respiratory failure.

### 2. Wells lived near where the Martians first land in *The War of the Worlds*.

Wells didn't search far from home for the appropriate landing place for his extraterrestrial invaders—he chose a location [next to his house](#). At the time he was writing, Wells lived in Woking, England, near the [Horsell Common sandpit](#). The sandpit, which was used as a

gravel mine for years, is the point of first contact for the alien invasion. Today, the old sandpit no longer serves as a mine; instead, it is a pilgrimage site for fans of Wells and science fiction.

### 3. Orson Welles's 1938 radio adaptation did not actually cause a nationwide panic.

*The War of the Worlds* became particularly notorious after the premiere of Orson Welles's dramatic 1938 radio adaptation. [The broadcast](#) was famous because, according to reports, Welles's delivery was so believable that it caused a widespread panic, leading people to think aliens had actually landed on Earth.

More recent research suggests otherwise. Welles's program debuted at a time when radio was overtaking traditional newspaper media as the primary source of information—a reality that newspaper owners weren't pleased with. Historians speculate that a great deal of the "panic" was intentionally exaggerated by newspapers in order to discredit radio as a reliable source of information. The actual extent of the "pandemonium" caused by Welles's broadcast was barely noticeable. [One event](#) that the broadcast did cause was the confusion of a group of locals in Grover's Mill, New Jersey, which was mentioned in the program. A small band of frightened citizens fired guns at the town's water tower, which they believed had been turned into a Martian war machine.

### 4. The Martian "red weed" is representative of invasive species introduced through colonization.

In *The War of the Worlds*, the Martian invaders introduce a species of [red weed](#) that spreads across the globe rapidly, destroying entire ecosystems. Wells actually included a great deal of symbolism in his depictions of this plant, particularly its color being reminiscent of the British Empire's traditional red uniforms and pageantry. The British Empire had colonized a great deal of Earth's territory at this point, often unintentionally introducing species such as foxes, cats, and rats to remote areas that they settled. The Martians' careless spread of the invasive red weed reflects the introduction of invasive species across the globe by European colonists, often with terrible effects on the species and ecosystems native to those regions.

### 5. *The War of the Worlds* inspired one of the fathers of space travel.

Engineer and physicist [Robert Hutchings Goddard](#) (1882–1945) is regarded as one of the fathers of space travel. Goddard's work led to the creation of

214 patents for rocket components, which would later be used to create the first spacecraft launched. As a child, Goddard was fascinated by astronomy and the potential for space travel, and he recalled climbing a tree to watch the stars shortly after reading *The War of the Worlds*. It was on this day that he decided to dedicate his life to rocketry, greatly inspired by Wells's novel.

## **6. *The War of the Worlds* is based on Darwinian principles.**

In 1859—just a few decades before the publication of *The War of the Worlds*—Charles Darwin published *On the Origin of Species*, a text that would provide the framework for the scientific theory of evolution. Darwin was met with tremendous criticism since his revelations contradicted the established biblical story of creation. Wells was aware of [Darwin's theory](#) and applied his understanding of the theory to the alien species in *The War of the Worlds*. Having evolved greater intelligence and adaptations than humankind, this new species overthrows Earth in a testament to "survival of the fittest." Wells also included an intra-species view of survival of the fittest. He portrays his protagonist as an intelligent, capable human being who clearly survives the attack, as he is able to comment on it in past tense.

## **7. *The War of the Worlds* was a product of Britain's fear of invasion.**

During the late 19th century, Britain extended its empire across the globe. Despite this dominance, the country also experienced a paranoia regarding the [chance of invasion](#), as new technologies such as aerial bombardment opened up unforeseen vulnerabilities. The British were fearful of an invasion by their age-old enemies, the French, as well as the Germans. Wells incorporated this paranoia into *The War of the Worlds*, showing a weakness to which there was no realistic protection—a technologically superior alien race.

## **8. Wells's illustrator had a difficult time deciding how to portray the Martians.**

Warwick Goble [illustrated the first edition](#) of *The War of the Worlds* when it appeared in *Pearson's Magazine* in 1897. Wells's descriptions of the Martians' appearance had been rather vague, stating that, "actual Martians were the most extraordinary creatures it is possible to conceive." Goble, for whatever reason, decided to portray the aliens as a combination of crab and squid. This gave them a grotesque, monstrous appearance as Wells intended, but one that may look a bit silly to contemporary readers. Many of Goble's sketches were

intended to leave more to the readers' imaginations, showing only parts of a Martian body.

## **9. Two unauthorized versions of *The War of the Worlds* appeared in the United States before its official publication.**

In 1898 *The War of the Worlds* reached American audiences in an [unorthodox and illegal](#) fashion. The *Boston Post* and the *New York Evening Journal* both featured *The War of the Worlds* in a clear violation of copyright regulations. The periodicals both changed the novel's location from England to New England in order to localize the story for an American audience, and the *Boston Post* even went so far as to erroneously cite the author as "H.C. Wells." Wells responded to the unauthorized editions by stating:

*This adaptation is a serious infringement of my copyright and has been made altogether without my participation or consent. I feel bound to protest in the most emphatic way against this manipulation of my work in order to fit the requirements of the local geography.*

## **10. Wells was influenced to write *The War of the Worlds* based on inaccurate theories about water on Mars.**

Wells was inspired by false theories that claimed there was water present on the surface of Mars. The astronomer Giovanni Virginio Schiaparelli mapped the planet's surface in 1877, noting a series of dry channels he referred to as "cannali." Although *cannali* simply means "channels" in Italian, this term was widely mistranslated to "canal," implying the presence of water. Although Schiaparelli did not believe these channels carried water, the mistranslation caused another astronomer, Percival Lowell, to erroneously map a series of water-filled canals on Mars's surface. Wells was influenced by Lowell's maps, leading to the [widespread misinformation](#) that Mars was habitable due to the existence of water.