THE STAR

H.G. Wells

Analysis by Fausto Ciompi

Short Story, Sci-Fi

H. G. Wells's short story *The Star* (1897) depicts a massive celestial body approaching Earth that causes global catastrophes including earthquakes and volcanic eruptions. Through apocalyptic imagery, Wells critiques human complacency, irrationality, and anthropocentrism. The ending portrays a Martian perspective that reveals the insignificance of Earth's devastation in the cosmic scale.

Year of Publication	1897
Publication Place	London, UK
Editor	Doubleday and McClure
Entity	Cotopaxi (The only eruption explicitly mentioned in the story among the many that occur)
Collection	Tales of Space and Time (1899)

GEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

Volcanic eruption Cotopaxi (The only eruption explicitly mentioned in the story among the many that occur)

LITERARY EVENT

Time	January 1897
Location	Cotopaxi (but eartquakes and volvcanic eruptions interest the whole earth) Ecuador
Coordinates	-0.681107, -78.438307
Impacted Areas	areas from the volcano to the sea (Cotopaxi)
Base/Complex	highland plain with an elevation of about 3,800 meters
Typology	Emission Of Lava

Volcano/Eruption Typology	Stratovolcano
Anthropization Level	Metropolis, Public Buildings And Sites, Churches, Temples
Ecological Impacts	Earthquake, Physical Landscape Changes
Social Impacts	Destruction Of Dwellings, Deaths, Trauma, Depopulation, Forced Relocation

INDIVIDUAL REACTIONS & AFFECTS

Reactions

Name	Mankind
Age	All Ages
Native Place	The Whole Planet
Nationality	All Nationalities
Reactions	Solidarity, Prayer, Terror

COLLECTIVE REACTIONS & AFFECTS

Affects/Reactions

Name	Humans
Reactions	Panic, Solidarity, Passiveness, Escape, Prayer

LITERARY EVENT

COLLECTIVE REACTIONS & AFFECTS

Affects/Reactions

Name	Humans

LINGUISTIC & STYLISTIC ANALYSIS

Keywords	Destruction, Nearer, Wonder, New Brotherhood
Metaphors	"and suddenly there swept a shadow across that furnace of despair" (Wells)
Similes	"the waxing moon seemed but a pale yellow ghost of itself" (Wells 52)

"the flood like a wall swift and white" (Wells 61)

"the earth littered like a storm-worn beach with all that had floated, and the dead bodies of the men and brutes, its children." (Wells 64)

"like the hem of a robe" (Wells 60)

"like the glare of a white fire" (Wells 50)

"the world was as brightly lit as if it were midsummer moonlight" (Wells 55))

Motifs, Topoi, Mythologemes	Apocalypse, Death, Deities, Hyperdisaster, Ruins
Syntax	Unconventional Position, Parataxis
Punctuation	Dashes
Morphology	Preference For Nouns Adjectives

In the science fiction short story "The Star" (1897) by H.G. Wells, a massive celestial body collides with the planet Neptune and, after a prolonged journey across the heavens, ultimately crashes into the sun. At first, its appearance is met with curiosity and awe. However, as the star draws closer to Earth, that wonder quickly gives way to fear and dread. The warnings of a master mathematician—based on scientific calculations—are initially dismissed or ridiculed. When disaster finally strikes, people across the globe seek refuge in places of worship. In moments of existential crisis, Wells suggests, religious instinct often trumps rationality.

As the star nears Earth, the natural world descends into chaos. Climate systems spiral out of control, global temperatures rise, and geological disasters follow: volcanoes erupt—including Ecuador's Cotopaxi—and earthquakes ravage the planet. The earlier sense of fascination is swiftly replaced by horror. Yet, amidst the destruction, Wells imagines the emergence of a "new brotherhood" (65), a fragile but significant unity among humankind. Despite widespread devastation, humanity endures by retreating to the polar regions, where conditions remain marginally survivable.

The story closes with a distant observation from Mars, where the catastrophe is registered only as a "shrinkage of the white discoloration (supposedly frozen water) around either pole." This epilogue offers a jarring shift in perspective. According to the narrator, this reveals "how small the vastest of human catastrophes may seem at a distance of a few million miles" (58). It is a powerful reminder of the relative insignificance of human suffering when viewed from afar: a commentary on both the scale of the universe and the limits of human-centered thinking.

While biographer Claire Tomalin describes the story as "both unforgettable and wholly believable" (Tomalin 80), modern readers informed by astrophysics may question its scientific credibility. A celestial body passing that close to Earth without total annihilation seems implausible. However, the narrative is less concerned with scientific precision than with exploring human responses to cosmic threat. Bernard Bergonzi praised it for "the controlled profusion of its images" (Bergonzi 74), and many critics interpret the story as more than speculative fiction: as a critique of denial and prejudice in the face of impending doom. One of its strengths lies in vivid language, especially its frequent use of comparatives and superlatives—"brighter," "nearer," "higher," "the vastest"—which emphasize the magnitude of the approaching disaster.

Wells's didacticism takes the form of an apocalyptic parable. Patrick Parrinder notes that "Exemplifying Oscar Wilde's pairing of *fin de siècle* and *fin du globe*, the Martian invasion in the latter book [*The War of the Worlds*, 1898] is specifically associated with the turn of the century" (62). Similarly, "The Star" opens "on the first day of the New Year" (35), underscoring the sense of an era-ending calamity. Like many of Wells's longer works, this story interrogates a waning culture—late Victorian society—suggesting a symbolic sunset on civilization: "a great white star, come suddenly into the westward sky!" (49). As Marina Warner observes, Wells's vision of the future "mirrors the neurotic uncertainties of his present, as if the end of empire were being enacted in slow, planetary motion" (Warner 137).

Despite its apocalyptic premise, Wells avoids the florid tone often associated with prophetic literature. His language is strikingly restrained. He favors similes over metaphors and relies heavily on spatial and quantitative descriptions. By comparing celestial bodies and highlighting their shifting positions, he maintains a tone that mirrors scientific discourse. Rather than indulging in poetic abstraction, Wells's intent appears to be clarity and objectivity.

This objectivity supports the story's central symbolic device: the star itself. Rather than being character-driven, "The Star" is an idea-driven narrative in which the celestial body represents a broader existential threat. Ower describes it as "a revelation of the hostility of the Newtonian universe [which] at the same time parodies the celestial signs of both the First and the Second Coming of Christ" (173). It has also been argued that "Wells's broader project throughout his career was to develop a scientific eschatology that could answer the questions raised by the Bible through appeal to the evidence furnished by science" (Thompson 32). However, in this story rationalism is embodied in the master mathematician, a voice of reason and scientific insight whose warnings go unheeded.

As the narrative unfolds, Wells critiques not only irrationality but also complacency. Humanity, skeptical of the improbable, clings to routine even as the disaster approaches. The story exposes how ritual and habit can eclipse scientific truth in times of crisis. This indictment of irrationality dovetails with another major theme: anthropocentrism. Humans naturally place themselves at the center of the universe, assuming their significance to be self-evident. Yet the final Martian perspective undercuts this assumption entirely. Earth's devastation, so overwhelming to its inhabitants, is barely perceptible from afar. From the Martians' remote vantage point, Earth's apocalyptic upheaval is reduced to a mere visual nuance: a fading smudge of white at the poles. In this way, Wells challenges the reader to reconsider the scale of human importance in a vast, indifferent cosmos.

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