



Winter 2019

HG Wells' Anticipations : More "Perishable" Feminism

Kacey Sorenson

Brigham Young University, kacey.sorenson@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/mssp>



Part of the [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Sorenson, Kacey, "HG Wells' Anticipations : More "Perishable" Feminism" (2019). *Modernist Short Story Project*. 33.

<https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/mssp/33>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Modernist Short Story Project by an authorized administrator of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

Kacey Sorenson

Professor Watts

English 376: British Literature 1900-1950

18 April 2019

HG Wells' *Anticipations*: More "Perishable" Feminism

In researching H.G. Wells' evolving views on eugenics, race, anti-Semitism, and women, there was a noticeable absence of scholars referring to his last chapter of *Anticipations of the Reaction of Mechanical and Scientific Progress upon Human Life and Thought*. Regardless of why it has been overlooked, the aim of this study is to use the last chapter of *Anticipations* specifically to emphasize and confirm what feminist scholars have extracted as Wells' view of women: what he proudly owned as feminism was dismissed by his contemporaries as "very perishable" (Kirchwey 308).

120 years after Wells' birth and forty after his death, *The New York Times* published a 1986 article entitled "H.G. Wells: Socialist, Feminist, Polymath, Educator and Hero." Its author triumphantly declared that Wells "played a marvelous role in the opening out of modern feminism," claiming "he was a feminist in his own time, a leader in the cause of women's rights, and he was accepted as such by most of the women he knew and, in fact, by those with whom he went to bed" (Smith). However, Rebecca West-- a well-known feminist of her time and one of those women with whom "he went to bed"-- disagreed, publishing a scathing review of his 1909 novel, *Ann Veronica*. She nicknamed him "Old Maid," writing, "the sex obsession that lay clotted on *Ann Veronica* [...] was merely Old Maids' mania, the reaction towards the flesh of a mind too long absorbed in airships and colloids" (West 346). Her decidedly ironic nickname for

a man known for his promiscuity--Dr. Bonnie Kime Scott lamented in a 150-page report, “I haven’t much space for Wells’ marital and extramarital history in this essay”-- underscores an important aspect of his so-called feminism ignored by the *Times*: one-dimensionality, where women are only transactionally “useful” for sexuality and reproduction (112).

Before arguing Wells’ final chapter, “The Faith, Morals, and Public Policy of the New Republic,” of his first nonfiction novel *Anticipations* as under-discussed evidence of this perishable feminism, it is important to recognize other controversies presented in its text. Notably, Wells’ views on Jews and minority races are widely acknowledged as destructive and problematic. While Wells referred to *Anticipations* as “the keystone to the main arch of [his] work” (Mackenzie 161), one of his biographers observed it was also “the lowest point in Wells’s career as a social thinker” (Sherborne 151). *Anticipations* was published serially at the back of the April-December 1901 issues of *The Fortnightly Review*, and was an immediate bestseller. From primarily other texts, Wells has been identified as a “eugenicist and a racist,” accusations one scholar calls “biased” and “selective” (Partington 96). Admittedly, I lack familiarity with all of Wells’ other work and thus am not in as well-informed a position to agree or disagree with Partington on the selectivity of these scholars. I did notice, however, a complete absence of any discussion of Jews or anti-Semitism in Partington’s defense of Wells and *Anticipations*. Considering Wells refers to Jews as the “termite in the civilised woodwork” in his last chapter, Partington’s exclusion seems, in itself, selective and biased (Wells “Faith” 1080).

It is for this reason that categorizing this last chapter as only related to gender or sexuality is impossible: it would overlook Wells’ conclusions as to what the future could and should look like for Jews and other minorities. Though Partington tries to distance 1901 Wells with future

Wells, claiming that “[b]etween the publication of *Anticipations* in 1901 and that of *A Modern Utopia* in 1905, Wells altered his views dramatically,” Partington himself specifies only those views that changed “on the subject of the uneducated and the poor” (101). Michael Sherborne, author of a biography of Wells, similarly wrote he “would be arguing against negative eugenics; within three defending black people against race prejudice; within four advocating the desirability of a multiracial society” (148-149). Both, thus, fail to confront how Wells’ ideas did *not* change, ignoring his 1909 founding role in the British Eugenics Society (Leung).

From my understanding, I think these other ideas of Jews and of women have not garnered enough attention in the academic community. While other texts of his are criticized by feminist scholars for their limited view on women, those views were pretty clearly unveiled first in *Anticipations*. Thus, it merits more attention-- not for its profound poignancy or intrinsic value, but to further support the idea that Wells’ *kind* of “feminism” began early in his literary journey and is, in fact, perishable and problematic. It was not just his fictional female characters that were “all one specimen, carried away from some biological museum of his student days,” but females as a whole (Richardson 374).

In a 1909 letter responding to criticisms on the protagonist of his then-recently published novel, *Ann Veronica*, Wells defended :

I confess myself altogether feminist. I have no doubts in the matter [...] My book was written primarily to express the resentment and distress which many women feel nowadays at their unavoidable practical dependence upon some individual man not of their deliberate choice, and in full sympathy with the natural but perhaps anarchistic and antisocial idea that it is intolerable for a woman to have sexual relations with a man with

whom she is not in love, and natural and desirable and admirable for her to want them, and still more so to want children by a man of her own selection. (“Letter to the Editor”)

His intentions may have been good, but his explanation of his feminism reveals its extreme limitations. First, he decides he is qualified to be the one to “express the resentment and distress which many women feel,” and then claims it all revolves around their frustration that they have to depend on a man “not of their deliberate choice.” Then, he chivalrously claims “full sympathy” for women doing what they want with who they want, generously encouraging it as “natural and desirable and admirable.” Essentially, I read his feminism as self-serving: he is not fighting for the basic equality of women, but for more women to not feel guilty about *surely* wanting to sleep with him. What he says in *Anticipations* agrees with this limited view of femininity and womanhood.

In my first readings of *Anticipations*, I overlooked Wells’ somewhat disturbing rationale on women, that they serve a purpose and that the purpose is merely sexual or reproductive. Some of Voyant Tools’ features uncovered a comparable nature of how Wells speaks of Jews and how he speaks of women. In this 19-page text, he used the word “Jew” (also “Jewish,” “Jews,” etc.) 15 times, flip-flopping between disguised insults and confusing defense of Jewish people and tradition. “Women” (also “woman,” “mother,” or “girl,” etc.) appeared 16 times, and close re-reading of the text unveiled his diagnostic attitude of women’s transactional usefulness. I reached this conclusion prior to conducting any further research on what scholars had already said on Wells’ feminism.

This analysis proves useful because it provides empirical support to what the author was really discussing. For perspective, the word “world” was used more frequently than any other

word in the chapter (51 times). This is understandable, as *Anticipations* was, as the title suggests, his anticipation of the future world. Close analysis reveals, however, that the racial, cultural, and systematic changes “necessarily” implemented to fit his “ideal” New Republic were heavily tinged with bias. By the definition of eugenics, which is the “selection of desired heritable characteristics in order to improve future generations” Wells’ changes targeted those deemed inferior, “prohibiting marriage and breeding between ‘defective stock,’” (Wilson). Voyant tools confirmed and helped extract exactly who Wells considered “inferior” by tallying how often they appear in the text. While I already knew, in Wells’ mind, that creating the “New Republic” included essentially the neutralization of Jewish people and minority races as an actual people, Voyant helped extract Wells’ reference to women to make clear his belief in encouraging only the “ideal monogamic wife” in her primary role of reproduction and home making (1078).

Through this different lens, I identified passages that discussed the role of women in Wells’ New Republic, and read carefully around them to decipher his “anticipations.” In one passage, he encourages euthanasia as a way to stop couples of a “mean-spirited, undersized, diseased little man [...] married to some underfed, ignorant, ill-shaped, plain and diseased little woman” from having children because they would only be adding to the “swelling tide of miserable little lives” (1076). Notably, the negative male descriptors are of character trait and physical health, with “undersized” potentially as a comment on undernourishment (physical health) or appearance; the negative female descriptors, in comparison, have a definite focus on outward appearance--“ill-shaped,” “plain,” and “little” (1077). He then calls “miserable” all of the offspring these undesirable people could produce, musing on “what it will mean to have,

perhaps, half the population of the world, in every generation, restrained from or tempted to evade reproduction! This thing, this euthanasia of the weak and sensual, is possible” (1077). He is suggesting to target, by euthanasia, *half the population in every generation* of the world.

Contrary to what some would claim, this is not an idea that disappeared after Wells was criticized for his ideas in *Anticipations*: four years after publication in a conference on Eugenics, he said, “[i]t is in the sterilization of failures, and not in the selection of successes for breeding, that the possibility of an improvement of the human stock lies” (“Eugenics: Its Definition...”). Carefully examined, in his or in today’s time, his description of people appalling and animalistic, as is his decisiveness on euthanasia and the “sterilization of failures” (“Eugenics”).

This, I believe, is extremely important. Wells’ *Anticipations*, particularly its final chapter, has been primarily, and fairly, picked apart for its racist and anti-Semitic verbiage, especially in its dangerous encouragement--sometimes direct, sometimes masked-- of euthanasia, racism, and anti-Semitism in the name of a better humanity. The analytical tools in *Voyant* reveal, however, that there is more to be done in closely reading Wells’ work specifically in its misogyny, prescriptively concluding that forced sterilization or euthanasia of the “diseased woman” would be of value in creating a perfect world. To Wells, apparently, a “perfect” world is one that allows a leading literary figure to comfortably call Jews “alleged termite[s]” and dismiss women as an “economic disadvantage.” His definitions are demonstrative of power and influence, combined with bold language, allowing a dismissal of consideration for or demonstration of basic human decency. Further, the fact that *Anticipations* was a bestseller is demonstrative of consumers accepting such language without understanding its implications, historical or otherwise. Wells wrote in the name of science, universal betterment, and eventual perfection, but humanity is, by

definition, flawed, and a perfect human race has only ever been impossible. From a 21st century perspective, decades after the worst human genocide of all time that was led by a man whose “Bible” was US eugenicist Madison Grant’s *Defending the Master Race*, toying with the idea of creating perfection is more than just dangerous (Humber 2). Thus, it is not Wells himself that is dangerous. Rather, hidden and sprinkled throughout his anticipations, the underlying principles--those of exclusion and elimination as an effective umbrella response to various crises faced by humanity--are what are dangerous.

Not revealing these principles and labelling them for what they are, I think, risks rewriting history to be prettier than it was, like the *New York Times* comfortably publishing an article describing Wells as heroically feminist. Close analysis of *Anticipations* and his other work, however, proves he was not, nor was he considered so by his peers. Thus, this novel should be revisited by academics from a lens of equality--gender included-- where it seems to have previously been largely ignored. It confirms scholarship Wells as a “perishable” feminist, who had “a problem acknowledging the full humanity of women” (Heilmann 63) and “sought to reconfine the New Woman heroine to the very body economy that feminist and more progressive male writers were engaged in deconstructing. Unable to envisage their women characters other than in relation to men, [he] addressed [his] deep disquietude about the role of masculinity in a changing society by representing the war of the sexes as an essentially sexual war” (Heilmann 73). That “few of his women find meaningful work aside from motherhood” was not just seen in texts like *Ann Veronica*, *A Modern Utopia* or *The New Machiavelli*, but was evident first in *Anticipations* (Scott 116). It is important, thus, that more scholarly attention is given to *Anticipations*; additionally, I would argue that as his very first nonfiction novel it is even *more*

important, because it could guide scholars in recognizing how his ideas, first recorded in *Anticipations*, truly informed and founded the main corpus of his work.

Works Cited

- "Eugenics: Its Definition, Scope and Aims." *Sociological Papers*. The Sociological Society. London: Macmillan, 1905, pp. 58-60.
- Heilmann, Ann. "Revolting Men? Sexual Fears and Fantasies in Writings by Old Men, 1880-1910." *Critical Survey*, vol. 15, no. 3, 2003, pp. 56-73.
- Kirchwey, Freda. "Freda Kirchwey on Wells as the Ideal Father." *H. G. Wells: The Critical Heritage*. Ed. Patrick Parrinder. London: Routledge, 1972. 307-09.
- Leung, Colette, and Erna Kurbegovic. "Eugenics Education Society founded in Great Britain." *Eugenics Archive*, eugenicsarchive.ca/discover/tree/5150aa62a4209be523000016.
- Mackenzie, Jeanne and Norman. *H.G. Wells: A Biography*. Simon and Schuster, 1973, pp. 161.
- Partington, John S. "The Death of the Static: H.G. Wells and the Kinetic Utopia." *Utopian Studies*, vol. 11, no. 2, 2000, pp. 96-111.
- Richardson, Dorothy. "From 'In the Crank's Library: In the Days of the Comet.'" *Crank*, vol. 4, no. 11, Nov. 1906, pp. 372-376.
- Scott, Bonnie Kime. "Uncle Wells on Women." H.G. Wells under revision, Eds. Patrick Parrinder and Christopher Rolfe, London: Associated University Presses, 1986, 108-116.
- Sinclair, Stéfan and Geoffrey Rockwell. *Voyant Tools*. 2019. Web. 31 March 2019. voyant-tools.org.
- Sherborne, Michael. *H.G. Wells: Another Kind of Life*. Peter Owen, 2010, pp. 148-52.
- Smith, David. "H.G. Wells: Socialist, Feminist, Polymath, Educator and Hero." *New York Times*, New York City, 21 Sept. 1986. pp. 007012.
- Wells, HG. "The Faith, Morals, and Public Policy of the New Republic." *Anticipations of the*

Reaction of Mechanical and Scientific Progress upon Human Life and Thought.

The Fortnightly Review, December 1901, pp. 1063-1082.

Wells, H.G. "Letter to the Editor." *Spectator*, 4 Dec 1909.

West, Rebecca. "Marriage." *The Freewoman*, vol. 44, no. 2, 19 Sept. 1912, pp. 346.

Wilson, Philip K. "Eugenics." *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Encyclopedia Britannica, inc., 2019.

<britannica.com/science/eugenics-genetics.> Accessed 1 February 2019.