

From Dystopia to Utopia: Tonal Shifts and Perspective Change in H. G. Wells's *The Food of the Gods*

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ABSTRACT

*Many science fiction novels discuss either utopian or dystopian ideas. H.G. Wells's novel, *The Food of the Gods*, is unique in that it addresses both. This paper argues that H.G. Wells's use of tonal shifts in *The Food of the Gods* signals a change from a dystopian society to a utopian one. Human refusal to adopt inevitable evolutionary change creates the former, while a superior race's acceptance of it promises hope for an ever-improving future.*

One of the questions that H.G. Wells pursued throughout his life was “How will humans exist?” This is addressed in many of his novels, including a little-known work titled *The Food of the Gods*. *The Food of the Gods* is a speculation on human evolution, which occurs as different forms of Herakleophobia (The Food of the Gods) spreads across Britain. The novel is divided into three subsections, referred to as Books One, Two, and Three. While the first book is nearly comedic in its description of giant chickens plaguing the town of Hickleybrow, books Two and Three take on a much more serious tone in which the Children of the Food strive for acceptance in a world where they are rejected. Wells’s tonal shift between the first two subsections of *The Food of the Gods* demonstrates his belief that human resistance to evolutionary change creates dystopia, while a superior race’s acceptance of it creates a utopia that promotes growth and change.

Whether or not something is utopian or dystopian all depends on one’s positioning. Gregory Claeys, in “The Origins of Dystopia,” claims, “...the socialist engineering of human behaviour via the reconstruction of society; and the eugenic engineering of human behaviour via biological manipulation, were viewed widely as both positive and negative developments” (109). The reconstruction of a socialist society and the eugenic engineering of human behavior present in *The Food of the Gods* clearly favors the Children of the Food while presenting a disadvantage to humanity. The transition from dystopia to utopia occurs after Book One, once the Children of the Food gain agency.

Wells use of dystopian elements demonstrates the folly of humans attempting to avoid evolutionary progress. Michael Page, in *The Literary Imagination from Erasmus Darwin to H.G. Wells*, states, “*The Food of the Gods*...suggest[s] that as technological changes occur, human consciousness must grow along with it” (187). The world becomes a dark place for humanity because of its refusal to adapt to the changes their world is undergoing. Dr. Winkles notes, “Everybody can see that you [Bensington and Redwood] are up to a disturbing thing. And the human instinct is all against disturbance, you know” (Wells 545). Humanity does its best to resist all variants of bigness that become a part of the world that they inhabit.

One of the first ways humanity attempts to resist evolutionary change is simply through attacking any of the animals that become big due to outbreaks of the Food. Outbreaks occur

constantly, though they start with a man named Godfrey and his encounter with a giant wasp. Though Godfrey manages to kill the wasp and remain unscathed, the same cannot be said for others who encounter giant wasps. The narrator explains, "There was one victim, a grocer, who discovered one of these monsters in a sugar cask...He struck it to the ground for a moment, and it stung him through the boot...He was first dead of the two" (509). Deaths continue to occur as giant chickens and rats plague the town of Hickleybrow and its surrounding villages. In every account of these attacks, humans claim that they are the victims.

Despite their claims of victimization, however, the humans are always the first to open fire. When humans choose to leave the giant-sized animals alone, there are only "...reports...of mere passings or descents" (509). Clearly, leaving the animals alone would have caused less destruction. The narrative suggests this during the giant chickens' descent upon Hickleybrow. After one of the hens grabs a child in its beak, the narrator states, ". . . [the curate] hurled his mallet with all his might and main...it frightened the hen. It might have frightened anyone" (514). It is only after it is attacked that the hen causes some sort of destruction by putting a foot through a weak place in the tiles of Fulcher's roof. The narrator's attitude as well as the results of these attacks suggests that trying to rid the world of bigness may not be effective. The result of humans attacking the giant animals usually comes at a cost to them instead of the animals they want to kill.

Another way in which humanity attempts to evade evolutionary change is through political opposition to bigness. Dr. Winkles notes, ". . . the Society for the Total Suppression of Boomfood claims to have several thousands of members" (545). The Society finds Caterham, a politician, to help them attempt to make it punishable by law to make and store The Food of the Gods without special permission for anyone under the age of twenty-one. Other societies spring up as a result of the creation of The Society for the Total Suppression of Boomfood as well, such as The Society for the Preservation of Ancient Statures. Because of all the political societies forming around the issue of Boomfood, the Prime Minister decides upon a Royal Commission on Boomfood. Humanity seems to assume that if The Food of the Gods is put under restrictions by the government that it will cease to produce evolutionary change.

It quickly becomes clear how foolish is the thought that political organizations can stop

evolutionary change. The narrator states “. . . so soon as the plant or animal was fully adult, it became altogether independent of any further supply of food” (552). Stopping the creation and storage of The Food of the Gods might be effective in stopping outbreaks; however, it is too late to quell the spread from the plants already affected and mature.

The beginning of Book Two also demonstrates how futile is any political attempt to control the spread of the Food of the Gods. The narrator explains, “In spite of prejudice, in spite of law and regulation, in spite of all that obstinate conservatism that lies at the base of the formal order of mankind, the Food of the Gods, once it had been set going, pursued its subtle and invincible process” (563). The narrator tells readers outright that none of humanity’s attempts at resistance, pursued in Book One, will succeed by the time readers reach the first page of Book Two.

The story of the released convict epitomizes humanity’s loss of control of bigness. The convict was imprisoned before the creation of The Food of the Gods and not released until 20 years after the Food has been altering the landscape of Britain. The narrator explains, “To most men the new things came little by little and day by day, remarkably enough, but not so abruptly as to overwhelm. But to one man at least the full accumulation of those two decades of the Food’s work was to be revealed suddenly and amazingly in one day” (585). Wells’s inclusion of the convict’s view of the world serves to demonstrate just how much the world has changed since the beginning of the novel, which none of the main characters would have noticed since it was a gradual change for them. The convict’s astonishment at how the world looks demonstrates how the world is changing to fit the Children of the Food’s needs instead of the needs of humanity.

Book Two of *The Food of the Gods* marks where the tone changes from humans comedically failing to prevent their dystopian world from changing, to one where more utopian hopes are introduced through the Children of the Food. However, conditions do not improve for humanity. In fact, humanity’s dystopian environment loses comedic value and gains more of a foreboding sense of dark consequences. Humans continue to perish in attempts to stop outbreaks and ultimately begin war with the Children of the Foods over reproductive rights.

There is no opposition to the opinions of humanity until Book Two because the humans who had eaten and would become Children of the Food were children with no agency. However, by Book

Two, the Children of the Food inherit agency from their parents and use their own voices as they become agents in their own right. The narrator explains, “. . . The Children of the Food, growing into a world that changed to receive them, gathered strength and stature and knowledge, became individual and purposeful, rose slowly towards the dimensions of their destiny” (564). The narrator implies that the Children of the Food are meant to be in charge of the world, that it is their destiny to become the rulers of mankind. The counter perspective of the Children of the Food that begins to be offered in Book Two contributes to the change in perspective that is noticed between book one and further subsections.

In order to fully understand the change in tone, one must understand what Wells’s position regarding the issues of “. . . the socialist engineering of human behaviour via the reconstruction of society; and the eugenic engineering of human behaviour via biological manipulation . . .” (Claeys 109). Wells is a promoter of eugenics and socialism, and therefore would have found the horror of humanity at the transition of their society purely foolish and comedic.

Jerry Bergman, in *H.G. Wells: Darwin’s Disciple and Eugenicist Extraordinaire*, claims that “. . . eugenics became for Wells, as well as for many other Darwinians of his time, a key to human salvation” (117). Darwin’s theory of evolution left open the possibility that evolution could lead to “stagnation and regression” instead of advancement (Bergman 117). Wells’s way of preventing regression and stagnation was to have an oligarchy picking the best and the brightest of humanity. Bergman notes, “Wells believed that evolution, operating on its own, was not ‘progressive,’ but needed to be ‘directed’ by the educated elite” (118). Wells feared that without some kind of control over evolution that humanity would fail to improve and start to regress.

Wells developed his opinions regarding socialism and eugenics from T.H. Huxley, his professor and a fellow Darwinian. Ken Davis, in *The Shape of Things to Come: H.G. Wells and the Rhetoric of Proteus*, notes, “. . . [Huxley] made a profound impact on Wells and provided the paradigm for his entire personal, political, and literary life” (111). Huxley, like Darwin, believed that humans descended from animals and that humanity is no less susceptible to acting instinctually or barbarically. Huxley also believed that the human conscience was the result of evolution and that it could be developed even more. As Davis writes, “. . . we may just be able to transcend our animal origins, and replace

biological evolution with social evolution” (111). It was through Huxley that Wells became interested in using eugenics to improve society and to form a more perfect state through socialism.

Consistent with his belief in socialism, Wells’s conditions for utopias follow the vision of the Marxist theorist Ernst Bloch. According to Bloch, “. . . all art is in essence utopian, since it provides an image of the world as it might be if it were improved” (James 125). *Food of the Gods* exemplifies utopian thinking by imagining an improved world consisting of human giants. Furthermore, Bloch claims that utopias “. . . must remain fragmentary, dialectical, partially unfinished: the work of art does not satisfy in its autarkical self-completion, but as becoming” (James 126). If a society is perfect and has no room for improvement, it is easily destroyed because it will no longer evolve. Instead, the society must be continually self-improving, always on the brink of perfection.

The Food of the Gods maintains the idea that the first generation of the Children of the Food is only the beginning of an idyllic structure. Cossar’s son proclaims, “We fight not for ourselves but for growth-growth that goes on forever. Tomorrow, whether we live or die, growth will conquer through us” (Wells 639). The Children recognize that their generation will not be the best generation of Children of the Food. They will fight against humanity to ensure a better future for those who will follow them. They are fighting for “growth,” for the evolution and betterment of humanity (639).

In *The Food of the Gods*, the future always promises to be better than the present, a clear tenant of Bloch’s rules for utopia. *The Food of the Gods* ends on the promise that humanity will be forced to evolve, but gives readers no real sense of a conclusion. One never finds out how the great battle between the humans and the Children of the Food ends, but one can assume that it ends with the triumph of progress. However, society can never be perfected because of the implication that it is through continued “growth” that improvement, and thus utopia, endure (639). If the novel had a firm conclusion, the possibility of utopia would cease to exist.

In Books Two and Three of *The Food of the Gods*, Wells’s utopian vision is visible through the Children of the Food. Simon James, in *Maps of Utopia: H.G. Wells, Modernity, and the End of Culture*, explains that “Wells’s utopias are . . . in dialogue with . . . previous literary utopias: Plato, in particular is a constant point of reference” (127). Throughout their childhood, the Children of the Food display different kinds of Platonic requirements for utopia that the regular humans fail to do.

The Children of the Food are not restricted by the laws and rules that govern humanity and are therefore able to see what would be best for the world.

One of Plato's requirements for utopia that Wells incorporates in *The Food of the Gods* is a want to do work. James states, "Individuals in utopia should not labour from compulsion, but from accurate Platonic recognition of the common good, and because their labour is a type for which they are well fitted, and for which they have been adequately trained" (131). Cossar's giant sons are invested in doing labor for the common good when they are young. For example, they attempt to build a road that would be much more efficient than the current road system. The narrator explains, "... one morning about dawn...[they] had set to work to make a road about the world...driving that road straight as a bullet toward the English Channel . . ." (Wells 591). The lawyer who tells Cossar's sons that they cannot build straight through so much privately owned property even admits that having a straight road might be more advantageous to everyone as opposed to the lanes that currently exist; however, he is too bound by human laws to allow Cossar's sons to continue their project.

After being deterred from building one road to go around the entire world, Cossar's sons move to a different project that they believe will better life for regular humanity: building a giant house for many people to live in. One of the sons states, "Lots of them [humans] haven't houses fit to live in... Let's go and build 'em a house close up to London, that will hold heaps and heaps of them and be ever so comfortable and nice...." (592). The boys legitimately want to make the society they live in better and more pleasant for everyone, but once again, humans prevent them from doing so. After these two attempts, the giant children begin to recognize that the world as it is does not allow for progress toward the common good. This realization ultimately leads them to realize that they must be in control of humanity in order to be constantly progressing towards utopia.

The Children of the Food are more fit to survive in the new world that the Food of the Gods has created. However, this is not simply based upon the fact that they are immune to attacks from giant rodents, which to them are merely normal sized rodents, nor is it based upon the fact that they are simply stronger than regular humans. James reminds us that another component of Plato's utopia is education. He states, "In Plato's *Republic*, the purpose of education is to enable its recipients to know good, and thus to do good For Wells . . . scientific education is the essential foundation of

the ideal society” (129). Therefore, it is not good enough for the Children of the Food to simply be more physically fit to survive in their environment. They must also be well-educated.

The importance of education in the lives of the Children of the Food becomes particularly obvious when the lives of Cossar’s sons are juxtaposed with the life of Caddles. Cossar’s sons are well-educated. The narrator recounts, “Cossar...[did] get building...a comfortable well-lit playground, schoolroom, and nursery for their four boys . . .” (Wells 552). Cossar’s sons are provided with an area that is meant to help fill them with all the knowledge that they will need to be well-educated adults later in life. Compare this to Caddles, whose education lies in the hands of the Vicar of Cheasing Eyebright. Of his education, it is said that, “He [the Vicar] never taught the monster to read- it was not needed; but he taught him the more important points of the Catechism . . .” (577). Compared to Cossar’s sons, Caddles’s education is barely existent, putting him at an immediate disadvantage.

It is Caddles’s lack of education that ultimately results in his death. James explains, “. . . the fate of Caddles . . . proves that size and strength alone are not sufficient for evolutionary security” (James 151). Caddles is not equipped with the tools that would allow him to live. He has the potential to live up to the standards set for the Cossar brothers, but he is consistently treated as though his giantness is a disability. As Caddles begins to enter puberty, he is thought of as ugly by the Vicar, who explains his looks as, “. . . the degenerate strain coming out in him . . .” (Wells 575). He is viewed as a burden by Lady Wondershoot and the rest of Cheasing Eyebright. Yet, Caddles shows an immense capacity for intellectual thought. The narrator explains, “In spite of the simple instructions of the Vicar...he [Caddles] began to ask questions, to inquire things, to *think*. As he grew from boyhood to adolescence it became increasingly evident that his mind had processes of its own-out of the Vicar’s control” (581). Caddles, despite being treated as though he were a degenerate, is capable of intellectual thought. It is the townspeople of Cheasing Eyebright who keep this possibility from him.

Caddles attempts to escape the town that is holding him back from his full intellectual potential, but this only leads to his demise. The narrator asks, “What was he seeking? He wanted something the pigmy world would not give, some end which the pigmy prevented his attaining, prevented even his seeing clearly, which he was never to see clearly” (613). Humans, the pigmies, do not want to educate someone who presents a threat to their existence. For the humans of the novel,

exempting those who are related to them, educating the Children of the Food will only allow them to slowly wipe out humanity as they know and understand it.

Because the Vicar and the rest of the population of Cheasing Eyebright refuse to educate Caddles, he does not understand the consequences of resisting arrest when he is in London. He does not even understand what blood is. The narrator states, “He was stung and wrenched by pain. What was this, warm and wet, on his hand?” (617). Caddles grasps for understanding and knowledge of the world around him, but he attempts to get it from the people who view him as a problem instead of those who will fight to protect him. This is not a disadvantage that Redwood and Cossar’s sons face. They have their parents to defend them. Caddles is utterly isolated, while Cossar’s sons thrive and live to see the beginning of what will be the replacement of humans with the Children of the Food.

That the Food of the Gods is distributed to certain children, and ultimately removed from the giant children who are deemed unfit to have it, suggests that the existence of the Children of the Food is controlled through eugenics. Wells himself “. . . loathed ‘the masses’ and believed that birth control was crucial to ensuring a brighter human future . . . a small elite would control such decisions. . . .” (Herrick 107). Bensington and Redwood in many ways make up this small elite in their distribution by deciding which children will receive the Food of the Gods to and which ones will not. The children that they choose tend to be upper or upper-middle class, such as the princess or one of their own children. Meanwhile, Mrs. Skinner manages to distribute some of the Food to Caddles, who is very much lower class. Because he is lower class and cannot ensure “a brighter human future” with his lack of education, Caddles must die (Herrick 107).

Survival of the fittest is an ever-present idea in *The Food of the Gods*. James Herrick, in *Scientific Mythologies: How Science and Science Fiction Forge New Religious Beliefs*, explains, “Wells’s vision of the humanity to come is perhaps most passionately presented in a little-known book titled *The Food of the Gods* (1904)” (106). Wells was a huge promoter of the Eugenics movement and believed in Friedrich Nietzsche’s idea of the *Übermensch* or “overman.” Herrick explains that the overman is “The idea of a superhuman . . . the person of superior intellectual, spiritual, or physical capacity. . . the individual who rises above the run of ordinary humanity” (102). The Children of the Food have risen above ordinary humanity simply through their physical traits. The ones that survive

are also well-educated, perhaps even beyond the humans in the novel.

Wells, through his narrator, suggests throughout the novel that the Children of the Food are to be the overman. When describing Redwood's child, the narrator states, ". . . presently little Redwood, pioneer of the new race, first child who ate the Food, was crawling about his nursery . . ." (552). Already in Book One, there is foreshadowing of what is to come. Redwood's child is a "pioneer of the new race" (552). He is what humanity is going to become: bigger, better, stronger. Compared to ordinary humans, these giant children can do extraordinary things. They are humanity's next evolutionary step, which is why at the end of the novel all humans seem likely to be exterminated. Humans would not allow this new race, The Children of the Food, to progress.

By the end of the novel, Redwood (father) has fully come to terms with the fact that humanity must be abolished. He tells Cossar, "It isn't *our* youth...They are taking things over. They are beginning upon their own emotions, their own experiences, their own way. We have made a new world, and it isn't ours. It isn't even sympathetic . . ." (634). Redwood is cognizant that the Children of the Food are the next stage in the growth of humanity. He recognizes that it was his job to start this race by feeding his son the Food of the Gods, but he now sees that this was the only part he was meant to play. He knows he must step back and let the overman take control. Herrick explains, "Science fiction has a long history with such 'progressive' understanding of human evolution, often portraying the current human race as but a step along the way to something grander" (101). Redwood seems to be the face of this progressive understanding in *The Food of the Gods*.

While Redwood seems to be one of the only members of humanity that understands they must cease to exist to allow for progression and growth, the Children of the Food themselves all seem aware of this by the end of the novel. One of them states, ". . . you cannot have pigmies and giants in one world together...it is for the little people to eat the Food" (Wells). The Children of the Food choose to turn to ecological warfare in order to remove humanity from existence. They plan to force all of humanity to become giants by spreading the Food in the air, making all of those who are still growing susceptible to its effects. Eventually, there will be no humans left, at least as they are originally understood in the novel. In order to continue the advancement of the human race, The Children of the Food are forced to begin war with humanity.

By the end of *The Food of the Gods*, Wells has shifted from a completely dystopian world to one of a hope for utopia through the newly emergent overmen. Page notes that when “the novel shows the fathers protecting the children against the prejudices of the ‘little people’ and educating them for the future...[it] shifts from being a novel of giant menace, to something different: a utopian novel ...” (188). The change that Page refers to occurs after Book One. It is through this change that Wells demonstrates the folly of trying to escape evolutionary progress and how, in attempting to escape that, humanity will probably be destroyed. It is those who accept progress and growth, such as Redwood and the Children of the Food, who will inherit the Earth, not those who oppose it.

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