Your notes

GCSE English Literature: revision notes

The War of the Worlds

Contents

1. Plot
2. Themes and context
3. Form
4. How to get top marks
5. Key terms
6. Quick questions
7. What to do next

Plot

- The unnamed narrator lives in Woking. A cylinder from Mars lands on Horsell Common, and the Martians kill onlookers with a **Heat-Ray**.
- More cylinders land. Martians in huge three-legged fighting machines destroy towns with the **Heat-Ray** and Black Smoke. The narrator flees, and his brother escapes from London; the warship Thunder Child destroys a fighting machine.
- The narrator is trapped in a ruined house with a terrified curate, who is taken by a Martian. He later meets an artilleryman with grand plans for survival.
- The Martians die from Earth's bacteria, which they had no defence against. The narrator is reunited with his wife.

Themes and context

- **Imperialism** (the British feel what colonised peoples felt), science and **evolution**, human arrogance, survival, and religion.
- Published in 1898, at the height of the British Empire and after Darwin's theory of **evolution**. The narrator compares the invasion to the destruction of the Tasmanians.

Form

- A first-person account, mixing the narrator's experiences with his brother's, written like a report from after the events.

How to get top marks

- Have a big idea: Wells turns **imperialism** around, so that Britain gets treated the way Britain treats others.
- Use the narrator's documentary style: a calm, factual voice makes an impossible story feel real.
- Use the ending: bacteria, not humans, defeat the Martians, which punctures human arrogance.

Key terms

Imperialism	One nation taking control of others.
Heat-Ray	The Martians' weapon.
Evolution	Darwin's theory of how living things change over time.
Invasion literature	Stories about Britain being invaded, popular in the 1890s.

Quick questions

Cover the answers and test yourself: remembering is what makes it stick.

1. Where does the first cylinder land?
2. What weapon do the Martians use first?
3. What destroys a fighting machine at sea?
4. Who is the narrator trapped with in a ruined house?
5. What kills the Martians in the end?
6. Which theme is shown by comparing the invasion to the Tasmanians?
7. When was The War of the Worlds published?
8. Who has grand plans to survive underground?

Answers

1. Horsell Common, near Woking
2. The Heat-Ray
3. The warship Thunder Child
4. A curate
5. Earth's bacteria
6. Imperialism
7. 1898
8. The artilleryman

What to do next

Practise 10 questions on this topic

Try 3 exam questions, with mark schemes

Read the lesson, one step at a time

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