

# Contemporary Approaches to Classic Texts H.G. Wells' War of the Worlds

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*Gill Robins outlines the elaborate project she undertook to read a classic novel by moving away from the single subject discipline and creating a scenario that engaged and enthused the children. It also gave them choices, which produced a strong engagement with contemporary media rather than written language. She concludes by asking the question: was it a success?*

## **Step one – the hook**

It seemed like any other morning as my Year 6 class arrived. A few children, noticing that the task board was empty, asked what we were doing that day, but they were totally unprepared for what followed. After being issued with press passes, they were summoned to a press conference led by Dr. Xavier Delfosse (teacher in role), one of the team at the European Southern Observatory at La Scilla, Chile, who had discovered a new planet, named Gliese 581c.

The press conference, as well as announcing the discovery of the planet, provided scientific details about its size, its



*Journalists at the press conference*

position in the solar system and the number of light years from earth. With disbelief fully suspended, the children were hooked. Questions flowed when the press conference was opened, as each child was asked to give their name and the paper or scientific journal which they represented.

What made this planet special? Its climate suggested there was a possibility that it could sustain life. How did scientists know that? The planet fitted into the Goldilocks zone – not too hot, not too cold, just right. What might that life form look like? We have no idea how a life force might have evolved elsewhere in the universe. Could we travel to Gliese 581c from Earth? Not with our current technology, but who knows what the future might hold? How do you know this planet isn't just a gas giant? Would we be burnt by the sun if we went there? Is it surrounded by a magnetic field? What is its gravity? Could we make contact?

The press conference was drawn to a close with questions still spilling from the children, who were reluctant to let go of their roles.

As they left, they were given a pack of genuine press releases – the planet was discovered on 25 April 2007, *Times Online*, *Seattle Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Daily Mail*, *MSBNC.com* and *Associated Press* are just a few agencies that have archived articles.

They needed no encouragement to read the press releases, which they discussed in detail and with great enthusiasm. They were then given their task – continuing in their roles as journalists they were to use a variety of written and online resources to prepare a news report. They were given a free choice of producing a newspaper report, scientific journal entry, TV or radio broadcast or web page design.

We viewed two online reports, at [www.starlightlearning.com/newsinspace.html](http://www.starlightlearning.com/newsinspace.html) and a news broadcast from Channel Four News, [www.channel4.com/news/articles/science\\_technology/new+planet+may+support+life/466372](http://www.channel4.com/news/articles/science_technology/new+planet+may+support+life/466372), a humorous take on the discovery of a new planet and the possibility of alien life. A discussion about this podcast soon showed that the children perceived the detailed scientific rigour behind the humour.

After a brainstorming session about adapting language to audience and finding an appropriate angle on the story, the children chose their groups, expert roles and the medium for their final communication. It came as no surprise that, apart from one group of boys who were fascinated by the science and so chose to report for a technical scientific journal, all the children chose TV, radio or web reports. After being made aware of the importance of meeting their deadline, they went off to research and construct their reports.

The results were impressive – all the groups included detailed scientific facts, whatever medium they chose, and they also included debate (some very humorous) about the viability of life forms. Several groups considered our current technological capabilities and how these could be deployed to contact alien life forces. They also adapted their language to match their chosen medium:

**Rachel:** Good evening and welcome to News Today.

**Hollie:** I'm Hollie Webb.

**Rachel:** And I'm Rachel Harris.

**Hollie:** Reporting for News Today.

**Rachel:** For the first time, astronomers in Chile have discovered a 'super earth' outside of our solar system that is potentially habitable. About five times the mass of earth, the planet orbits a cool, dim, 'red dwarf' star located in the constellation of Libra, the team from the European Space Observatory said in a press release today.

**Hollie:** This planet, named Gliese 581c, has earth-like temperatures – a key step towards answering whether our cradle of life is unique in the universe. Let's go over live now to our reporter on the spot in Chile – Matt.

**Matt:** Thank you, Hollie and Rachel. Yes, well, you might be wondering how to spot an alien planet. Astrobiologists have been explaining that the colour of plant life (if it exists) would depend on the quality of light available from the local sun. On earth, our custom colour is green, but on another planet it is as likely to be red or yellow, as green. Back to the studio.

**Hollie:** Thank you, Matt. Earlier today, I spoke to a scientist at NASA, who said this: 'Because of the planet's temperature and relative proximity, this planet will most probably be a very important target of future space

missions dedicated to the search for extraterrestrial life.' Our reporters George and Mark have been looking at the facts. Here's their advice.

**George:** Thank you, Hollie. Well, before you book your extraterrestrial flight, there are just a few facts you might want to bear in mind. Anyone sitting on this planet would weigh five times as much on earth.

**Mark:** Your birthdays would add up much more quickly as the planet orbits its star once every thirteen days. And an e-mail would take 20 years to arrive. Back to you, Rachel.

**Rachel:** Thank you, George. We hope you have enjoyed this News Special, brought to you from News Today. Thank you for watching.



The TV report

A class discussion at the end of the day revealed that they had chosen TV, radio or web reports because they perceived these to be more fun to prepare and present. They were aware, when they chose their formats, that considerable effort would be required in researching and writing their reports. However, they all said that it didn't feel like effort, because of the enjoyment of working in a group, on a real task which had to excite their audience as much as it excited them. They felt that this made them discuss their use of language far more carefully than they usually did.

In answer to my final question, 'Have we done English today?' they all answered with an emphatic, 'No'. They were genuinely shocked when they realised that they had 'done' English all day, including drama, speaking, listening, group discussion, reading, writing, researching text, explaining, using language to communicate effectively, editing, refining, presenting and evaluating – and most of this was done without prompting.

As they prepared to go home, they became absorbed in the issue of alien life. Did it exist? What would it be like? Could we communicate? Would they ever come to Earth? Without realising it, they were setting their own scene for the following day.

### Step two – towards the text

The children arrived to find posters inviting them to an Extraordinary Meeting of the Town Council. A large, steel sphere lay in the middle of the field. Some very pensive children waited to be given security passes in order to attend the meeting, where they were introduced to Commander Alexis Higgins from Civilian Security Services (teacher in role).

Referring to breaking news about red flares which had been seen coming from Gliese 581c, he revealed that MOD tracking stations had been taking an interest in the planet for some days after a significant increase in electro-magnetic activity had been detected. Suspicions had been confirmed during the night, when RAF reconnaissance planes had detected metal spheres falling to Earth. One of them had been taken to Holmby Firth tracking station for analysis, which showed that the sphere was transmitting data which currently could not be interpreted.

The Council had been summoned because a sphere had landed in their town and as people of considerable skill, the Government was asking for their help. Early information from forward probes suggested that vessels may be leaving Gliese 581c with an Earthbound trajectory. If the sphere in the middle of the field was a homing device, it was reasonable to assume that the vessels would land there, although due to the distance this would not be for another 5 billion Earth years. The local residents were being asked to assume that the life force was friendly and would be received in peace.

Brief group and paired discussions were followed by a class brainstorm entitled, THINK THE UNTHINKABLE: THINK THE IMPOSSIBLE, in which we listed all the immediate issues which would need to be addressed – where they would land (clearing an area, emergency service support, field hospitals, crowd control, medicines), how our armed forces would be deployed (troops in plain clothes so that the visitors weren't frightened, helicopters, landing sites), how to welcome the visitors (a parade or fair, BBQ, disco or nightclub), how a small town would handle world media interest (control, food supplies, utilities), how to help aliens understand daily living (money, language, work, staying safe, keeping healthy, healthcare, churches, schools, shops), how to inform local residents without scaring them..... the whiteboard was soon filled with detail.

After further discussion we decided that six areas of information would be critical or important – physical needs, communication, safety, behaviour, media and belief. The scale of the issue was really beginning to dawn – even though Commander Higgins assured us of full MOD support, we began to doubt whether a small town could cope.

We were fortunate, with parental support, to be able to bring various professionals in at this point – teams from the medical, fire and police services, a teacher, a vicar and a BBC journalist. The residents were divided into groups and assigned an expert to question. After preparation, they were given time to discover how each expert would deal with the issue.

The Fire Service team was very popular, bringing copies of genuine emergency evacuation and support plans, as was the Police team, with their plans to handle civil unrest on a large scale. The vicar led a lively discussion on his role in offering comfort and support, whilst the medical team outlined the problems of drug supplies, hospital beds and staffing. The residents wondered whether the aliens could cure cancer with more advanced medical expertise, but conversely how would they cope with viruses and allergies? One group felt they had found a viable solution to the use of our school, by dividing the day equally between themselves and the alien children, until they realised that this would prohibit integration. A further complication was raised when they realised that they may not understand each other anyway, and would have to devise ways of non-verbal communication to show openness and friendship. Supposing they didn't communicate by talking? This was neatly disposed of by deciding that if an alien life force possessed the technology to reach Earth, it would definitely have the technology to interpret Earth languages.

The journalist explained how world media attention would create its own crisis, especially if communication systems were damaged. It quickly became clear that even if the aliens were friendly, there could still be extensive disruption.

The residents, after reviewing their rapidly filling notebooks, prepared a new set of questions, before interviewing a second expert. They were then jigsawed so that each group had at least one set of information from every expert.

They decided that a public information booklet was the best way to prepare the aliens, with a different page of the booklet designed and published by each member of the group. Surprisingly, despite some groups choosing to use computers to design their books, nobody thought of making digital copies available.

Suddenly, during a subsequent Council meeting to check on progress, Commander Higgins was handed a press release informing him that requests from RAF spy planes, escorting Gliesian vessels through British air space, had been ignored. The Government was raising our security status to Red Alert. We were to assume that this was an aggressive invasion. Residents were advised to return home and make whatever preparations they and their families felt were necessary.

Before we finished for the day, the children were asked to explore their feelings through *msn* conversations with a friend. How had their parents reacted? How did they feel? What would they do? Each pair was given a paper mock-up of an *msn* screen, on which they described their feelings. There was total silence during this activity and a tangible sense of emotion.





A public information leaflet

A typical conversation contrasted those emotions of fear, excitement and curiosity:

- \* **Cheeky:** Hey, Monkey. Wats up? R U scared about the aliens?
- ☺ **Monkey:** Yeah. I'm worried wot they could do to me. You?
- \* Not really. They won't do anything to us.
- ☺ You don't know. They could be two faced.
- \* Wot does that mean?
- ☺ They could show kindness, but deep down be horrid!
- \* Yeah. Know wot u mean. Do u think u will make friends with them?
- ☺ No! Cos they're new they could do anything!
- \* U don't know till u meet. U shouldn't make remarks like that till u know them properly.
- \* I don't wanna take that chance.
- ☺ Well if they come 2 dis SKL u could maybe ask 2 look after 1 of them + u could become m8s.
- \* I've already got friends. I don't want them 2 take over our SKL. U will stick by me?
- ☺ Yeah, course. Ur my m8.

We finished the day, in sombre mood, by reading Chapter One – The Eve of Battle (Sasaki & Wells 2007).

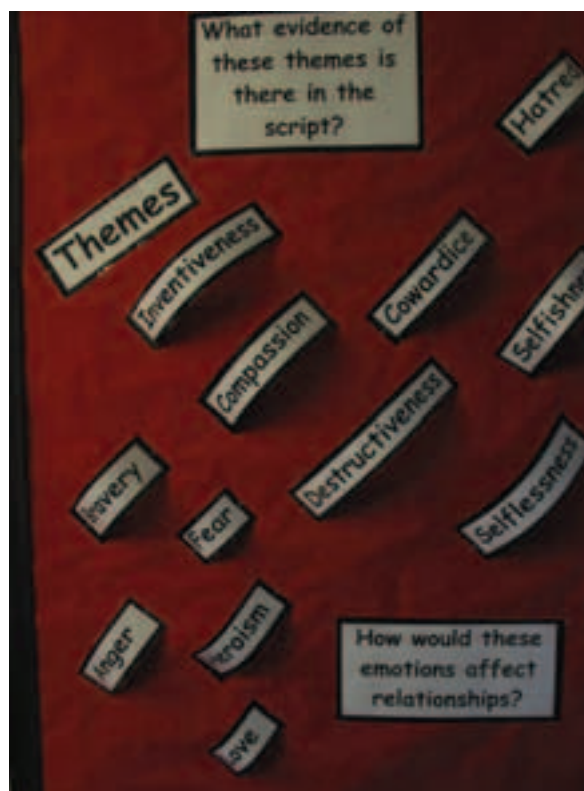
### Step three – setting a scene

We decided to use writing journals specific to this project, so after a brief review of the purpose of a journal, we read the first five chapters of the book. We started a theme board, to which we would add themes as we discovered them in the text, and an emotions board, where we listed the various emotions of the characters and how that might affect the way they interacted with each other.

We listened to the opening of Jeff Wayne's soundtrack, (Wayne 2000) discovering that we could hear a heartbeat and the sound of the cylinder opening.

At this point, the children decided that they were ready to start creating their own narrative, so using images from the book, we held a word blast. After studying and discussing the images, the classroom was silent whilst we all, including teachers, wrote down as many words as possible in one minute, to describe what we saw. Everyone's words were listed, so that we could borrow each other's words. The purpose of this is two-fold: to read the images as thoroughly as possible, including detail which would otherwise be overlooked and to stimulate word generation before any writing is commenced. Some children automatically grouped their words into reactions (terror, disbelief, amazement, excitement, agitated, disturbed, tense) and descriptions (abandoned, destructive, gloomy, highly intelligent, mesmeric, hypnotic, inquisitive, jagged, intimidating, tentacles).

Then we devised a simple planning diagram for the task, which was to create a Gliesian, its vessel and fighting machine. With a rich word-bank resource to use, children turned to designing and annotating their Gliesians.



Boards were used to examine themes and emotions



Designing and annotating the Gliesians

The narrative which resulted from their annotated images was powerful:

*'Fire was everywhere. I could hear the cry of tiny babies. Large, scaly, red and orange aliens floated everywhere on hover machines. Red laser beams shot from strange guns. In the middle of the city, a huge metal transport ship had landed on several citizens who weren't quite quick enough to get away. Iron propellers had sliced through London's buildings and several aeroplanes fell out of the open sky. Sweat was trickling down my hot face. Was it a dream? Was it real?'*

*'The alien's skin turned lighter because of the extreme coldness of Earth. He found it hard to breathe as the freezing wind carried oxygen instead of carbon dioxide. As drops of cold liquid fell onto his hand, a piece of flaky skin got carried away in the turbulent breeze.'*

#### Step four – characterisation

After reading and sharing discussion about chapters 6 to 9, we updated our themes and emotions board, before tracking the route of the Martians from Horsell Common to London on maps. Interested to explore how the Martians both moved and worked in teams, the children were given extracts from the text which described this and they worked in groups to produce freeze frames. As we analysed the digital images, we discussed how the Martians might have communicated with no apparent language and how we read non-verbal communication with each other.

There was also some detailed discussion about mechanical movement and a group of children at this point worked on an ICT robotic control project. After noting anything useful in their journals, children continued to develop their own narrative:

*'Curious, we crowded around the mysterious machine and then we saw guns, rockets and claws. Everybody backed away. Then the machine moved..... it moved like an animal cracking the ground in its path, shooting and knocking down everything in its way. It picked men up and crushed their skulls. People ran screaming like a colony of ants on the move.'*

#### Step five – exploring emotions

Paired improvisation followed the reading of chapters 10 to 15, to try and discover why such tension grew between the narrator and the curate. Journals were used to sketch and thought track the curate, who was then hot seated. The following extract was a creative angle on the exploration of emotion, from an alien perspective in an e-mail home:

*'I've tried to explain to them that I am trying to help them look after their environment, but they looked at me, anger blazing in their eyes. I hid and took some time to explore. As a wet substance pattered on me, I saw a small, bright sun emerge from soft, delicate clouds. It appeared to give off a sweet scent, as if it was sending me a secret smile that only I could notice. This is my new friend, the only part of this race that I can trust, the only part that understands my responsibility and how I feel.'*

At this point, the children were to create the antagonistic character, but it became clear that some children were beginning to shape and pace the development of their narrative for themselves and some were beginning to develop interests which didn't involve writing – art and DT in particular. The children, used to reading both still and moving images and therefore regarding this as communication, felt that they were meeting the outcome of the project, which was to 'communicate a science fiction story.'

#### Step six – ending narrative effectively

After reading and sharing discussion of chapters 16 to 20, we worked with our partnership secondary school on a science project. Each child was provided with a Petri dish and taught how to collect bacteria correctly. The samples were taken away, incubated, and returned for the children to examine using microscopes. Most children had grown e-coli and were fascinated by the magnified patterns and colours. This gave rise to plenty of scientific discussion about harmful and helpful bacteria, which, in turn, informed a possible language-rich end to their narrative.

Using structured discussion groups, children posed questions about suitable endings. What is the greatest threat to our world now? Might Earth be invaded? Now that space travel is a reality, would we want to find life on another planet? Each group chose a question and debated it. Reporters were then envoyed to other groups so that



Book Cover

ideas could be generated across a range of questions to produce thought-provoking endings. Writer's workshops were offered at this point for anyone wanting to refine their stories, or who needed help.

As the structured part of the project drew to an end, the children decided for themselves how they wanted to communicate their interpretations of the story. Choices ranged from art (book covers, sculpture, collage, pastels and watercolours), DT (trying to resolve the problem of stability and movement of alien machines) and ICT (presentations written in powerpoint).

No child chose to finish their written narrative - it appeared, in discussion, that they were satisfied with the writing which they had already done and didn't feel any compulsion to finish their stories. In fact, one group decided to write poems, the following being an example:

The oval shaped hood stands tall  
Over the blue interior.

Flexible legs stretch over the mountains  
In enormous strides.

Ductile tentacles touch and feel the landscape  
Very inquisitively.

### Analysis

So was the project a success if completion of a written task was not a priority in the children's minds and there was nothing to assess?

That depends on how success is measured. We incorporated nearly all the English PNS strands for Year 6 progression to Year 7, together with most of National Curriculum thinking skills in reasoning, creative thinking and evaluation.

The children drew together all the art, DT and ICT skills which they had developed during key stage 2, sometimes understanding for the first time how those skills, which had

been learnt in the isolation of single subject lessons, could be applied in a wider context. The multimodal approach of using image, sound, gesture and word to create meaning from text was definitely successful. Not only were the children enthusiastic about their learning, often complaining about having to stop at break time (one child said he'd stopped watching the clock), but they were accessing and sharing language through this variety of media that might otherwise have lain dormant. And given genuine choice, they chose to interpret 'communicate' in ways other than written language.

There are areas of this project which I would develop in future. It would have been inspirational for the children to create their own films as a means of communication – their choice of TV reports at step one demonstrated how enthusiastic they were about anything which they perceived to be 'fun', and the quality of their finished reports showed that learning wasn't compromised.

Despite the use of the soundtrack and the inclusion of suggestions about sound language, very little found its way into the children's writing. I'm not sure why this was. I would also like to have had the time and facility to compose soundtracks and explore the themes of conflict, heroism or fear through dance. The children were interested in the idea of creating a 'brave, new world', but we had no time to pursue this.

The implications for a shift in emphasis from single subject discipline to an integrated curriculum are clear. Children are motivated to learn skills as they become aware that they need them. A lot of DT and ICT skills were refreshed or learnt – one of the commonest phrases I overheard between peers was, 'How do I...?' They can exercise choice about curriculum content, and although the project didn't produce assessable sci-fi stories, the writing during the project was motivated by enthusiasm and was richer in language than any end of unit assessment task.

Would I use contemporary media to enthuse children about a classic text in future? Definitely. We construct more meaning through visual, non-verbal and auditory signs than through spoken or written language – a fact which we instinctively use every day to communicate meaning in our classrooms. And the key words there are 'communicate' and 'meaning'.

Through a range of twenty first century media, children both constructed personal meaning from H.G. Wells' Victorian text and communicated personal meaning through their responsive narratives.

### Children's Books

Sasaki, C. & Wells, H. G. (2007, illus. Akib, J.) *Classic Starts™ The War of the Worlds Retold from the H. G. Wells original*. Sterling Publishing. ISBN13: 9781402736889.

### Music (Audio CD)

Wayne, J. (2000) *Jeff Wayne's Musical Version of The War of the Worlds*. Columbia. ASIN: B00004SKNF