



# **NEGOTIATING THE IMPOSSIBILITY: A POSTCOLONIAL ANALYSIS OF H. G. WELLS'S "THE COUNTRY OF THE BLIND" (1904) THROUGH DERRIDA'S PHILOSOPHY OF 'HOSPITALITY'**

---

**Guillem Mas-Solé**

Universitat de Lleida  
[guillemmas.98@gmail.com](mailto:guillemmas.98@gmail.com)

**I**f it has been accepted that colonial interests have significantly affected the history of the world during the last few centuries, the subsequent narratives that sprang from the colonialist enterprise must bear significant weight on the postcolonial discussion. H. G. Wells occupies a highly prominent seat amongst those authors who used their pen and influence to critically scrutinise the ills of Empire, and his 1904 short story “The Country of the Blind” stands as proof of it. The purpose of this paper is to expose the imperialist discourse that permeates Wells’s story so that it may be carefully examined through a postcolonial perspective. The initial hypothesis defends that “The Country of the Blind” can be seen as an ironic reversal of the colonialist effort in which the invader turns into the invaded. Regarding the approach that will be used, the study will follow a thorough examination of the relationships between characters and the social structures that are depicted in the narrative. The research will be framed within postcolonial theory, relying heavily on Jacques Derrida’s ideas of

‘guest’ and ‘host’ as presented in his philosophy of ‘hospitality.’ Finally, this paper shall offer an in-depth analysis of “The Country of the Blind” in search of tangible proof that might help better comprehend the colonialist nature of its character relations.

**Keywords:** colonialism; postcolonialism; H. G. Wells; hospitality; otherness.

## 1. Introduction

Right when the British Empire was at the height of its power, W. H. Woodward opened his book *A Short Story of The Expansion of the British Empire (1500-1902)* with the following lines: “Two characteristics particularly mark the history of the English nation: the development of ordered liberty and the growth of its external dominion” (Woodward 1902, 1) or, in other words, freedom and expansion. History, however, claims that, in order to carry out the latter, not only was the former compromised but also attacked, insulted and derided, for as Woodward claimed, the qualities of race which made the English a free people also made them a colonising one.

As Elleke Boehmer defends in her seminal work *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature* (2005), if it is accepted that colonial interests have significantly affected the history of the world during the last few centuries, then much of the literature produced during that time can be described as colonial or postcolonial, even if just tangentially. (2005, 1) In the realm of postcolonial criticism within speculative, fantasy, and science fiction literature, an intricate tapestry of historical and contemporary developments has unfolded in the last decades. Indeed, this critical lens endeavours to deconstruct and analyse how these genres, historically steeped in Eurocentric narratives, have engaged with and perpetuated colonial ideologies. Key academic texts, such as John Rieder’s *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction* (2008), offer a theoretical foundation for understanding the deep-seated connections between colonialism and the evolution of science fiction. Rieder’s work posits that the emergence of science fiction as a distinct genre is

intricately linked to the colonial experience. The anxieties, power dynamics, and cultural clashes inherent in colonialism find expression in science fiction narratives. Thus, this theoretical framework allows for a nuanced exploration of how science fiction has functioned as a vehicle for encoding and reflecting colonial ideologies. Likewise, *So Long Been Dreaming: Postcolonial Science Fiction & Fantasy* (2004), edited by Nalo Hopkinson and Uppinder Mehan, also serves as a testament to the diversity of voices seeking to reclaim and redefine speculative genres. Hopkinson's introduction and Mehan's concluding reflections provide another critical lens through which to understand the significance of subverting established norms within speculative fiction, showcasing, at the same time, a range of postcolonial perspectives challenging conventional narratives and envisioning alternative futures. Certainly, to give expression to the colonised experience, postcolonial writers aimed to thematically and formally undermine the narratives that underpinned colonisation, that is, the myths of power, the race classifications and the imagery of subordination. (Boehmer 2005, 5)

In this regard, H. G. Wells (1866-1946) stands as a paramount figure in the British literary scene of the turn of the twentieth century. Considered by many as the father of science fiction, Wells incorporated in his works path-breaking ideas such as time travel, alien invasions, invisibility, and biological engineering. As American historian W. Warren Wagar describes him, he was a prophetic social critic who dedicated his great literary talents to the construction of a global progressive vision (2004, 22), devoting great effort in his writings to the exploration of the different mechanisms that configured the functioning of his society. Foremost amongst his most celebrated novels stand out *The Time Machine* (1895), *The Island of Dr Moreau* (1896), *The Invisible Man* (1897) and *The War of the Worlds* (1898), all of them published in a span of merely four years. It comes as no surprise then that, due to the immense success that these works enjoyed upon release and the great impact they had—and still have—in the history of the English literature, Wells's short stories have been paid less attention. Notwithstanding, as Sabine Coelsch-Foisner argues, it cannot be ignored that his short stories, most of them published between 1894

and 1906, constitute a critical corpus in his oeuvre, both as regards their vast popularity and their imaginative scope (2008, 174). Wells himself was convinced that the turn of the century was “a good and stimulating period for a short-story writer.” (1911, 8) Such a “compact and amusing form” (1911, 9) allowed him to evolve “situations and anecdotes from little possibilities of a scientific or quasi-scientific sort.” (1934, 433) Indeed, it could be argued that Wells’s urge to invent and invert life was founded in late Victorian and early Edwardian culture, and that his writings were instrumental in enlarging the experimental horizon of this generic framework.

In its April 1904 issue, the *Strand Magazine* published what was to be considered Wells’s “most powerful and bitter of his short stories” (McConnell 1981, 119): “The Country of the Blind.”<sup>1</sup> Told as a third-person narrative, the story centres on the accidental discovery of a latter-day utopia by a mountaineer named Nunez whilst climbing a fictitious mountain in Ecuador. Upon arrival, Nunez finds that all the inhabitants of this new-found mysterious place are completely blind, and he discovers that, far from being considered an asset, his sense of sight is regarded as an affliction. The mountaineer leaves the realm of civilisation and enters the world of the past, which is deeply concerned with salvation through primordial reversion rather than material regression to a pastoral state. Once within the community of the blind, Nunez is confronted with both physical and epistemic obstacles. (Peñalba García 2015, 478) As Simon J. James defends, the story mocks the traditions of imperial romance in order to completely undermine the ideologies of colonial domination. (2012, 38)

Given the utter success of the story itself as well as that of the man who penned it, it is no surprise that “The Country of the Blind” has attracted the attention of several critics throughout the years. Most of the criticism that it has received has explored its

---

<sup>1</sup> Due to space restrictions, the present study shall only work with the original 1904 version of the story, not the 1939 revision in which H. G. Wells completely changed the ending. (To expand on the topic, see Parrinder 1990, 71).

utopian/dystopian nature: Huntington (1982) focused on its anti-utopian aesthetics, Boulton (1995) analysed its mythopoeic genius in relation to its political undertones, and Coelsch-Foisner (2008) centred on the anti-utopian symbolism of the tale. However, while it is true that some studies have focused on its imperialist dimension (Koppenfels 2004; Liggins *et al.* 2013; Peñalba García 2015), none of them has offered a thorough analysis of the postcolonial discourse with which the text is imbued. Therefore, the main objective of this paper is to cover this niche by uncovering the imperialist discourse imbued in the text so as to thoroughly analyse it through a postcolonial lens. In this regard, the initial hypothesis is that “The Country of the Blind” can be read as an ironic reversal of the colonial enterprise in which the invader becomes the invaded. In regard to the methodology that will be employed, the study shall follow a detailed analysis of the character relations and the social structures that are presented in the story. The research will be framed within postcolonial theory, especially drawing on Edward Said’s notion of the ‘Other.’ Furthermore, Jacques Derrida’s ideas of ‘guest’ and ‘host’ as presented in his philosophy of hospitality will be central to the analysis. Firstly, this paper shall briefly expand on said notion of hospitality with the intention to conceptually frame its main ideas and lay the foundations upon which, later on, the study will be built. Then, an in-depth analysis of “The Country of the Blind” shall be carried out in search of tangible proof that might help better comprehend the colonialist nature of its character relations. And finally, a conclusion shall be drawn evaluating whether the hypothesis that this paper initially sets out to establish has been successfully achieved or needs further appraisal.

## 2. Derrida’s Theory of Hospitality

As British scholar Judith Still argues, the theory of hospitality has enjoyed a renaissance in the last decade due to at least two main factors: the first would be the recent movements of population that are taking place towards, and within, an expanded Europe. She claims that the political response of the pre-expansion European community’s nation states to these newcomers is frequently couched in terms of (the limitations of) hospitality. On the other

hand, the second reason would relate to the existence of a growing body of powerful philosophical writing, some of which pre-dates the current wave of postcolonial xenophobia, and most of which draws on the experiences of colonialism and of the Second World War as well as the stimulus of more recent events. (Still 2010, 1)

Given the fact that “The Country of the Blind” is essentially a story that revolves around the social dynamics established between a guest (Nunez) and a host (the community of the blind), this paper contends that Jacques Derrida’s philosophy of hospitality can offer critical insight into the particulars of this relation as well as provide a lens through which to read a postcolonial narrative hitherto unexplored. For this reason, it is deemed necessary to briefly expand on said notion of hospitality as put forward and theorised by Derrida in his works “Of Hospitality” (2000a) and “Hostipitality” (2000b). As previously stated, the intention is none other than to present a brief explanation of the main ideas behind the theory so as to conceptually frame them and lay the foundations upon which, later on, significant part of the analysis shall be erected.

First and foremost, Derrida establishes the terms ‘host’ and ‘guest’ as key elements in the theory. He claims that trying to define the concept of “hospitality” is almost an impossible endeavour, because the mere idea eludes linguistic explanation. Hospitality is an experience held to a multitude of variables. In his own words: “we do not know what hospitality is.” (2000b, 6) He ventures to propose that an aspect that hospitality entails is the act of inviting and welcoming the stranger. (2000b, 4) Therefore, the dichotomy of host-guest is intrinsically necessary, for without one or the other, neither of them exists. He begins by differentiating two types of hospitality that respond to different laws. On the one hand, the ‘law’ of hospitality (in singular) entails the idea of ‘unconditional’ hospitality, to which he says: “the law of unlimited hospitality; to give the new arrival all of one’s home and oneself, to give him or her one’s own, our own, without asking a name, or compensation, or the fulfilment of even the smallest condition.” (2000a, 77) He regards this type of hospitality impossible to achieve, arguing that it could never be accomplished not so much because it is an ideal, but because it is an impossible ideal. In his own words: “the law of

absolute hospitality commands a break with hospitality by right.” (2000a, 25)

On the other hand, the ‘laws’ of hospitality (in the plural) promote a ‘conditional’ hospitality framed by rights and duties established between host and guest. He claims, however, that they are largely unwritten and subject to flux and interpretation, for which it is very difficult to theorise over them. (2000a, 77) Nonetheless, he argues that it is here where we should draw our attention, claiming that hospitality is conditional in the sense that the outsider or foreigner has to meet the criteria of the a priori ‘other’, implying that hospitality is not given to a guest who is absolutely unknown or anonymous because the host has no idea of how they will respond. (O’Gorman 2006, 52)

To deepen the argument, Derrida puts forward in his essay “Hostipitality” that there is a certain hostility in all hosting (2000b, 4), coining the term ‘hostipitality’ (mixing the words ‘hostility’ and ‘hospitality’) to reflect the notion. In this regard, he says: “‘Make yourself at home’ this is a self-limiting invitation ... it means: please feel at home, act as if you were at home, but, remember, that is not true, this is not your home but mine, and you are expected to respect my property.” (2000a, 111) Indeed, here he defends that the guest might be or turn into a ‘parasite,’ to which he says: “not all new arrivals are received as guests if they don’t have the benefit of the right to hospitality or the right of asylum. Without this right, a new arrival can only be introduced ‘in my home,’ in the host’s ‘at home,’ as a parasite, a guest who is wrong, illegitimate, clandestine, liable to expulsion or arrest.” (2000a, 59)

Finally, to finish with the key arguments of the theory, Derrida assumes that “conditional hospitality takes place only in the shadow of the impossibility of the ideal version.” (2000a, 75) This concept of ‘impossibility’ is certainly relevant because, as O’Gorman surmises from Derrida’s text, impossibility is “an experience, ... a being in relationship with ‘otherness.’ It is the failure in the attempt to be open to the difference of the ‘other.’” (2006, 54) To this, Derrida states that “the very precondition of hospitality may require that, in some ways, both the host and the guest accept, in different ways, the uncomfortable and sometimes

painful possibility of being changed by the other.” (2000a, 170) This impossibility will be crucial for the analysis of Wells’s story.

In conclusion, as postcolonial theorist Ben Jelloun argues, the concept of hospitality is essential to understand the very nature of racism, for it always appears as a result of the breakdown of hospitality thresholds and boundaries. (1999, 24) Having established the chief concepts of Derrida’s theory, the following section shall thus provide a thorough analysis of Wells’s story using analytical tools borrowed from the postcolonial school of thought as well as the ones provided by said philosophy of hospitality.

### 3. “The Country of the Blind:” A Postcolonial Analysis

As the story opens, the narrator constructs a frame narrative that directly relates the mythic history of a remote mountain valley “in the wildest wastes of Ecuador’s Andes.” (CoB<sup>2</sup>, 367) In it, “cut off from the world of men” (CoB, 367), there lies the Country of the Blind. Fifteen generations prior, the valley had offered refuge to “a family or so of Peruvian half-breeds fleeing from the lust and tyranny of an evil Spanish ruler” (CoB, 367) who had invaded their land. Not long after their settlement, a disastrous earthquake reshaped the surrounding mountains, isolating the community forever from the outside world. Right from the very beginning of the story, then, the reader is made aware of the origins of the settlers. Indeed, the narrator elaborates deeply on the conditions under which the first families arrived at the valley, clearly establishing the immigrant provenance of the community that now peoples the land.

“The valley”, we are told, “had in it all that the heart of man could desire – sweet water, pasture, and even climate, slopes of rich brown soil with tangles of a shrub that bore an excellent fruit, and on one side great hanging forests of pine

---

<sup>2</sup> All subsequent references to “The Country of the Blind” (henceforth, CoB) are to the 2015 collection of Wells’s short stories published by Xist Classics and will be documented parenthetically within the text.



that held the avalanches high. ... In this valley it neither rained nor snowed, but the abundant springs gave a rich green pasture, that irrigation would spread over all the valley space. The settlers did well indeed there.” (CoB, 367-368)

It is certainly relevant that we are presented an Andean utopia in which all members of the group live in apparent peace and harmony. Such precondition will only stand in stark contraposition with the arrival of Nunez, an ambitious mountaineer from the outside world that will jeopardise that inner peace. Before that, however, it is stated that the only thing that marred the community's happiness was the fact that a strange disease that had come upon them long ago rendered all new-borns blind. The valley-dwellers' remaining senses heightened as blindness spread generation over generation until, eventually, they simply forgot what 'sight' was and, with that, the only cause of initial unhappiness disappeared.

When at last sight died out among them, the race lived on. ... They were a simple strain of people at the first, unlettered, only slightly touched with the Spanish civilization, but with something of a tradition of the arts of old Peru and of its lost philosophy. (CoB, 369)

It is worth noting that the narrator sees the community as a 'race' of their own, that is, different from the lettered and civilised Spanish one. Therefore, they had to build their community over retained—yet scattered—Peruvian cultural knowledge, rendering them, by extension, uncivilised and primitive. From this point of departure, their loss of sight could very well be initially understood as a sign of 'involution' to a baser, more primeval state of being that would couple perfectly well with the apparent nature of the community. However, with the arrival of Nunez, what seemed apparent will become conditional, and what seemed an evolutionary defect will become a clear token of evolution, envisaged as regressive. Nunez is presented as a man “who had been down to the sea and had seen the world, a reader of books in an original way, an acute and enterprising man.” (CoB, 369) Hence, he comes to be the paragon of the 'civilised' man coming from the “outer world.” Indeed, all the tensions that are created in “The Country of the Blind” are sustained upon contrapositions: primitive/civilised, inner

world/outer world, the known/the unknown, seclusion/openness and, above all, sight/blindness. This latter tension—as well as all the rest to some extent—works as much on a natural level as a symbolic one, and the story itself relies heavily on this dichotomy. It is precisely here where the first dramatic irony appears: the invader will become the invaded, and the coloniser will become ‘the other.’

In his ground-breaking critical work *Orientalism* (1978), Edward Said questions the very foundations of Western representation and the social construction of the ‘Orient’ as the ultimate ‘Other’ in history, literature, art, music, and popular cult. (Burney 2012, 23) The concept of orientalism, and, most specifically, orientalism as a ‘practice,’ according to Said, is a “systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage—and even produce—the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post Enlightenment.” (1978, 3) The representation that we have of the Country of the Blind (as a community) is part and parcel of this practice, that is to say, it is created as a binary opposition to the civilised Occident (even though Nunez does not essentially come from the Occident *per se*, he comes to symbolically represent it.) Initially, Nunez’s sole purpose in the Andes is to try the ascension to the top of the alluring mount Parascotopetl, which remained hitherto “an unconquered crest.” (CoB, 370) The choice of vocabulary is not at all arbitrary; Nunez has come to ‘conquer.’ To this, Said offers an illuminating remark, claiming that “the coloniser sees the colonised territory as being his own land, or as the point at which its history begins, wiping out centuries of prior existence.” (1978, 23) However, Nunez fails in his enterprise when he falls down a gorge, leaving the mountaintop still unconquered.

A while later, Nunez awakes to “the singing of birds” (CoB, 370), practically unharmed from the fall. He then realises that his knife and ice-axe have disappeared (perhaps a symbolic hint to the fact that he will have to enter the community of the blind devoid of anything with which to protect himself.) His fall, which is conveniently depicted as a descent to “a subsiding tide of ‘darkness’” [my emphasis] (CoB, 370), does indeed bear an echo of Marlow’s immersion into the very ‘heart of darkness.’ Arrived at

this point, Nunez observes that, once he is out of the throat of the gorge, he finds himself in a plain entirely bathed by “sunlight” (CoB, 370) (once again, ironically using binaries—in this case, darkness/sunlight—to frame the conflict that is about to occur). Upon observing the valley, Nunez deems it “very strange,” “unfamiliar” and especially “queer” when he sees a meticulous irrigation system configured throughout vast meadows bearing evidence of “systematic cropping piece by piece,” which gives a “singularly urban quality to this secluded place.” (CoB, 371-372) He is surprised to find “order” and “astonishing cleanness” in the organisation of the town itself, lying bare in the middle of the valley. (CoB, 372) Indeed, here lies a great example of the aforementioned technique of using binaries to create conflict, as it could very well be argued that Nunez’s initial astonishment at the organisation of the place directly responds to the disruption between preconception and reality taking place in his ‘Orientalist’ mindset.

Then, upon seeing three men walking down a path not far away from where he is standing, he gesticulates vehemently towards them but receives no answer. He then bawls loudly to catch their attention but the men do not appear to ‘see’ him. To that, Nunez ironically resolves: “the fools must be blind.” (CoB, 372) He is then sure that he has stumbled upon the fabled Country of the Blind, and with that realisation, he is filled with “a sense of great and rather enviable adventure” (CoB, 373) (yet another trait of the imperialist discourse, which urged colonisers to explore the conquered lands in quest of ‘adventure’). As Nunez approaches the settlers, an old proverb runs through his thoughts as though it were a refrain: “in the Country of the Blind, the One-eyed Man is King.” (CoB, 373) Indeed, there is much meaning contained in this short old saying. To start with, it segregates two types of people according to their natural ability to ‘see.’ Not only that, but it establishes that the sighted will always hold the power, even if he is one against many. Thus, it implies that the condition of ‘not seeing’ is essentially detrimental to the human and immediately places the blind lower in the scale of power ranks. This is, then, the mental predisposition that will define Nunez’s initial relation with the settlers or, in other words, this is the mental predisposition with which the invader approaches the soon-to-be-

invaded. Nunez is, therefore, immediately scheming how he can make himself absolute ruler of the fertile valley.

After exchanging a few words of greeting, Nunez soon realises that the men have no conception of the meaning of blindness:

“There is no such word as *see*,” said the blind man, after a pause. “Cease this folly, and follow the sound of my feet.”

Nunez followed, a little annoyed.

“My time will come,” he said.

“You’ll learn,” the blind man answered. “There is much to learn in the world.”

“Has no one told you, ‘In the Country of the Blind the One-eyed Man is King?’”

“What is blind?” asked the blind man carelessly over his shoulder. (CoB, 377).

This is the first instance in which the reversal of roles is made apparent. The one who is presented as filled with “folly” and in need to “learn” much in the world is the actual invader, the man who comes from “the great world—where men have eyes and see.” (CoB, 375) In fact, to the settlers, Nunez is but a “wild man” coming “out of the rock;” “a wild man—using wild words . . . His mind is hardly formed yet. He has only the beginnings of speech.” (CoB, 375) Furthermore, the settlers make up his name and start calling him Bogota, taking it from one of the “senseless” words he uttered in his first encounter with the villagers. Indeed, Said himself devoted some lines to discussing the ‘power to name.’ He emphasises that the ability to name and the privilege to represent the Oriental rests with the Western establishment Orientalist “because he not only speaks in vast generalities, but he also seeks to convert each aspect of Oriental or Occidental life into an unmediated sign of one or the other geographical half.” (Said 1978, 246-247) Therefore, making the settlers be the ones to engage in such an imperialist practice is yet another example of how Wells played with subversive twists to expose the very colonial enterprise.

Now that the internal action of the story has finally put host and guest together in the units of time and place, it is time to look back to Derrida's philosophy of hospitality to deepen the analysis of relational dynamics between Nunez and the villagers. Let us commence by establishing Nunez as the guest and the settlers as the host (which is as obvious as it is important). The first thing that needs to be looked at is the condition under which the guest arrives at the new place, for it is then when we can define him as an actual guest or, if need be, a parasite. Nunez arrives clearly uninvited to a place about which he has little to no prior factual intelligence. One of the laws of hospitality states that the outsider or foreigner has to meet the criteria of the a priori 'other' in order to be received at the host's home as a guest. As it has been argued, however, identifying the other in this story is not an easy endeavour, as both host and guest are otherised in each other's minds. The settlers are clearly the other in Nunez's colonialist mindset, but Nunez falls inevitably into that same category—albeit perhaps unintentionally—by the standards of the community of the blind. As previously mentioned, Derrida argues that, in order to be received as a guest, the outsider needs to have the benefit of the right to hospitality or the right of asylum. (2000a, 59) Since the rights of the guest are always conditioned and conditional, it can be surmised by the welcoming reaction of the villagers to Nunez's arrival that he is indeed received as a guest, honouring this way the stranger's right to protection and shelter. Judging then by the settlers' initial hospitality, Nunez is not to be read as a parasite (albeit he might turn into one). Having established that, in order for pure hospitality to occur, Derrida defends that

There must be an absolute surprise. The other must arrive whenever he or she wants. ... If I am unconditionally hospitable, ... I must be unprepared, or prepared to be unprepared, for the unexpected arrival of any other. ... If, however, there is pure hospitality, or a pure gift, it should consist in this opening without horizon, without horizon of expectation, an opening to the newcomer whoever that may be. It may be terrible because the newcomer may be a good person, or may be the devil. (2000a, 70)

The settlers definitely did not know what type of person Nunez was nor did they possibly have any clue as to Nunez's intentions. However, Nunez is immediately accepted into the fold of the

community and is shown attention and care. As the narrator tells us, “the eldest of the blind men explained to him life and philosophy and religion” (CoB, 376) as well as how the world—their world—came into being. He is told how “time had been divided into the warm and the cold, which are the blind equivalents of day and night,” (CoB, 376) and encouraged him to do his best to learn. However, Nunez’s reaction to this is summarised in the following lines: “‘Unformed mind!’ he said. ‘Got no senses yet! They little know they’ve been insulting their heaven-sent king and master. I see I must bring them to reason.’” (CoB, 377) Keeping the old adage in mind that “in the Country of the Blind, the One-eyed Man is King,” Nunez is unable to conceive his new reality in different terms other than imperialistic ones. In his mind, he is the one in charge, he is the one who, through ‘reason,’ will make all the blind bend to their “heaven-sent king.” In other words, he somehow manages to conceive himself as the guest at someone else’s home; the paragon of the colonialist mindset. With that idea in mind, he plans a *coup d’état* to reverse the power dynamics and gain control of the land and its people. In order to do that, he resolves that he will “learn the manners and customs of the blind” (CoB, 378) to earn their confidence. And so, he starts partaking in the day-to-day chores of the community, learning that “they led a simple, laborious life, ... with all the elements of virtue and happiness, as these things can be understood by men. They toiled, but not oppressively; they had food and clothing sufficient for their needs; they had days and seasons of rest; they made much of music and singing, and there was love among them, and little children.” (CoB, 378) And yet, he decides to rebel. First, he tries verbal persuasion, telling them on several occasions of sight. Then, upon seeing that they would not stand to “reason,” he resorts to force. One day, when he seizes a spade resolved to show them the advantage of eyes in combat, he learns something about himself: “it was impossible for him to hit a blind man in cold blood.” (CoB, 379) This instance of morality, which initially might come across as laudable, could very well be read as yet another way of performing his civilised nature in front of the insanity of the blind. In the midst of the quarrel, when a villager commands that he put the spade down, “he felt a sort of helpless horror; he came near obedience.” (CoB, 380) This very moment is a

turning point in the dramatic structure of the story, for it marks the beginning of Nunez's slow yet steady transition into 'actual' obedience. In a last outburst of imperialist pride, he bawls: "'Look here, I'm going to do what I like in this valley. Do you hear? I'm going to do what I like and go where I like!'" (CoB, 381) Then, after finally hitting a blind man with the spade, he runs away to hide in some rocks high up in a corner of the valley. "He thought chiefly of ways of fighting and conquering these people, and it grew clear that for him no practicable way was possible. He had no weapons." (CoB, 382) This crushing realisation also contains a lot of meaning. Only then does he realise that no conquering is possible if there are no weapons and not enough people to fight. Only then is he made aware that in the Country of the Blind, the One-eyed perhaps might not be King. After that, he starts his submitting process.

When he finally crawls down from his hiding place into the village:

"I was mad," he said. "But I was only newly made."

They said that was better.

He told them he was wiser now, and repented of all he had done.

Then he wept without intention, for he was very weak and ill now, and they took that as a favourable sign.

They asked him if he still thought he could 'see'.

'No,' he said. 'That was folly. The word means nothing – less than nothing!'

They asked him what was overhead.

'About ten times ten the height of a man there is a roof above the world—of rock—and very, very smooth.' (CoB, 382)

From that moment on, he essentially is made a slave: "They regarded his rebellion as but one more proof of his general idiocy and inferiority; and after they had whipped him, they appointed him to do the simplest and heaviest work they had for anyone to do, and he, seeing no other way of living, did submissively what he was told." (CoB, 383) Nunez's civilised perspective is rendered pre-revolutionary, and his experience of living among the blind is made distinctly dystopian, casting doubt, this way, on the very concept of

utopia. Nunez's foolish and egotistical sense of superiority backfires: the foreigner who strives to impose the structure of his culture on the new world is humiliated and condemned. In the light of a linguistic system that has no reference to the visible world, his language is inadequate: he does not name the area in the way of a coloniser; he and his worldview are renamed by the blind. And, with this, the process of hospitality (if it can be considered as such) is rendered useless and ridicule. The guest has morphed into a parasite, and the host has inflicted all types of violence (both physical and linguistic) to the visitor. In this way, Derrida's concept of 'impossibility' comes to the fore with sharpness, for neither of the two parts is able to be in relationship with otherness and, thus, both of them fail in the attempt to be open to the difference of the other. It is this very impossibility which renders mutual understanding 'impossible.' Nunez's total submission is gathered in the following lines: "The valley became the world for him, and the world beyond the mountains where men lived in sunlight seemed no more than a fairy tale." (CoB, 384)

Right towards the denouement of the story, Nunez meets Medina-saroté, his master's daughter. In a rather cursory manner, the narrator tells us that he rapidly falls in love with her and asks her hand in marriage to her father. The village reacts strongly against such a proposal, for they "held him as a being apart, an idiot, incompetent thing below the permissible level of a man. ... The young men were all angry at the idea of 'corrupting the race.'" [my emphasis] (CoB, 384) Finally, the elders resolve that plucking his eyes off would liberate him from his "brain damage" (CoB, 385) and would rise him from being a servant to the level of a blind citizen, thanking Heaven for science all the while. The postcolonial undertone of such a condition is better comprehended if seen under the light of Homi Bhabha's (1994) notion of 'mimicry', which he defines as "the process by which the colonised subject is reproduced as almost the same, but not quite" (1994, 86). Indeed, Nunez is forced in the most brute manner to 'mimic' the ways of the blind if he is to marry one of them.

Finally, after seriously pondering about the proposition, he is suddenly struck by a vivid realisation at the sight of "the morning,



like an angel in golden armour, marching down the steeps” (CoB, 387): he has to escape. Without second thoughts, he leaves everything behind and starts the seemingly impossible ascension out of the gorge with the image of the “great free world” (CoB, 387) in his mind. In the end, after having reached the summit, he lies on his back and rests, as “the glow of the sunset passed, and the night came ... under the cold stars” (CoB, 389).

#### 4. Conclusion

This paper initially set out to establish whether “The Country of the Blind” could be read as an ironic reversal of the colonial enterprise in which the invader becomes the invaded. In order to do that, a detailed analysis of the character relations and the social structures presented in the story has been carried out with the intention to uncover the imperialist discourse imbued in the text. The results that spring out from the study are certainly satisfactory. A postcolonial approach has proved to be of great value to elucidate said imperialist discourse, especially through the theories presented by Edward Said and Jacques Derrida. Indeed, Derrida’s philosophy of hospitality has helped to better comprehend the complications in the relationship between guest and host in a clearly colonial scenario and has indirectly shown how such type of failure works as catalyst for a racist ideology. Finally, it has made apparent that “The Country of the Blind” does not so much subvert or supplant rational beliefs and assumptions as it tests them. It creates a richly suggestive symbolism based upon dichotomies and contrapositions while employing the prevalent discourses of colonial and imperialist narratives, resulting in a profound scepticism with regard to both the unknown and the known. Wells’s short story pivots on a critical examination of modernity and the worth of colonialism. The idea of degeneration from a prior condition based on a mindset flawed with a heavy imperialistic mythology is certainly put into question by this ironic utopia, which stands in scepticism to the mainstream imperialistic ideas of Wells’s times that—in essence—still resonate nowadays.

## References

### Primary Source

Wells, H. G. 2015. “The Country of the Blind”. *The Country of the Blind and Other Short Stories*. Ed. Xist Classics. Tustin: Xist Publishing: 367-389.

### Secondary Sources

Bhabha, Homi. 1994. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge Classics.

Bergonzi, Bernard. 1961. *The Early H. G. Wells: A Study of the Scientific Romances*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Boehmer, Elleke. 2005. *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Boulton, Alex. 1995. “The Myth of the New Found Land in H. G. Wells’s “The Country of the Blind.”” *The Wellsian: The Journal of the H. G. Wells Society*, 18: 5-18.

Cantor, Paula A. and Hufnagel, Peter. 2006. “The Empire of the Future: Imperialism and Modernism in H. G. Wells.” *Studies in the Novel*, 38: 36-56.

Coelsch-Foisner, Sabine. 2008. “H.G. Wells’s Short Stories: “The Country of the Blind” and “The Door in the Wall.”” *A Companion to the British and Irish Short Story*. C. Eds. Cheryl Alexander Malcolm and David Malcolm. Hoboken: Blackwell Publishing Ltd: 174-182.

Derrida, Jacques. 2000a. *Of Hospitality*. Trans. by Rachel Bowlby. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

———. 2000b. “Hostipitality.” *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, 5.3: 3–18.

- Hopkinson, Nalo, and Uppinder Mehan. 2004. *So Long Been Dreaming: Postcolonial Science Fiction & Fantasy*. Ed. by Nalo Hopkinson and Uppinder Mehan. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press.
- Huntington, John. 1981. "Thinking by Opposition: The 'Two-World' Structure in H. G. Wells's Short Fiction." *Science-Fiction Studies*, 8.3: 240-254.
- James, Simon J. 2012. *Maps of Utopia: H. G. Wells, Modernity and the Ethics of Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Jelloun, Ben. 1999. *French Hospitality: Racism and North African Immigrants*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Koppenfels, Werner von. 2004. "'These Irritant Bodies:' Blinding and Blindness in Dystopia." *The Cambridge Quarterly*, 33.2: 155-172.
- Liggins, Emma, et al. 2013. *The British Short Story*. Basingstoke: Palgrave-Macmillan.
- O'Gorman, Kevin. 2006. "Jacques Derrida's Philosophy of Hospitality." *The Hospitality Review*, 8: 50-57.
- Parrinder, Patrick. 1990. "Wells's Cancelled Endings for 'The Country of the Blind.'" *Science Fiction Studies*, 17.1: 71-76.
- . 1995. *Shadows of the Future. H. G. Wells, Science Fiction, and Prophecy*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.
- Peñalba García, Mercedes. 2015. "'My World Is Sight:' H. G. Wells's Anti-utopian Imagination in 'The Country of the Blind.'" *EPOS*, 31: 475-484.
- Rieder, John. 2008. *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction*. Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press.
- Said, Edward. 1978. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Still, Judith. 2010. *Derrida and Hospitality: Theory and Practice*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Wagar, W. Warren. 2004. *H. G. Wells: Traversing Time*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press.

- Wells, H. G. 1911. *The Country of the Blind and Other Stories*. London: Aegypan Press.
- . 1934. *Experiment in Autobiography*. New York: Macmillan.
- Westmoreland, Mark W. 2008. Interruptions: Derrida and Hospitality, *Kritike*, 2.1: 1-10.
- Woodward, William Harrison. 1902. *A Short Story of The Expansion of the British Empire (1500-1902)*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

**Received:** January 23, 2023

**Revised version accepted:** November 21, 2023