



H. G. Wells' The Country of the Blind and the Idea of Xenophobia

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Herbert George Wells (1866–1946) English novelist, short story and novella writer, essayist, lecturer, author of children's books, historian, autobiographer, and critic. He was born into a low-middle class Cockney family in Bromely, Kent. Wells is a well-known forerunner of modern science fiction as he is referred to as the father of science fiction.



Critics in general conclude that the appeal of Wells' works is originated from his potentiality in introducing very exotic and fantastic aspects in his short stories and mixing them with common social aspects. Because of the passive impact of the First World War on Wells, most of his writings aim at the necessity of educating people and making communities more open-minded. In addition to that, he became very pessimistic concerning human future predicting more coming wars in the future. This is quite clear in some of his famous works such as *The War of the worlds*, *The Time Machine*, others. To Wells, one of the most obvious passive outcomes of wars is that war creates real isolated societies that are full of hatred and fear of each other. As a result, such communities become closed minded and never accept new thoughts, new ideologies, and even never accept new people.

This is the idea of xenophobia which will be fully explained in detail in the following Section.

This is one of Wells's most famous and important short stories that explore different aspects of human life in general and social matters in particular. This short story was written by H. G. Wells and first published in 1904 in a collection of Wells called *The Country of*

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the Blind and Other Stories. Later in 1939 the story was revised by Wells and republished an expanded version of the story.

H. G. Wells addresses the following themes in The Country of the Blind:

- An isolated community will generally overcome any disability like blindness after a few generations.
- Having adapted to cope with such disabilities, an isolated community will believe that its modified behavior is normal.
- An isolated community will tend to be closed-minded and xenophobic, and will persecute and (if necessary) maim anyone who is different and/or non-conformist.
- The maxim, "In the Country of the Blind the One-Eyed Man is King", from Desiderius Erasmus, is not necessarily always true.
- The story may be seen as an allegory of society's treatment of those with ability or intellect beyond the understanding of the many. The fear of the 'barbarian' or at least unenlightened masses is a recurrent theme in Wells's writing.

Generally, xenophobia refers to the hatred and/or fear something strange to oneself. The origin of this word comes from Greek, "xenos" which means strange, or stranger, and "phobos" which means fear from oneself. On a more particular level, this term is used to describe fear from foreigners, those people who look different and strange, especially by appearance.

According to the Dictionary of Psychology, xenophobia can be applied not only strangers from other countries but also on people of different origins, religions, personal beliefs, habits, language, and orientations. Thus, a xenophobic person believes at some level that if a person is of a different origin or any other criteria, that person then is a foreigner.

In literature, the idea of xenophobia is found in works that deal with isolated and closed-minded societies or communities. The most





popular example that deals with this theme is H. G. Wells's *The Country of the Blind*. In this short story, through the isolated community of the blinds the idea of xenophobia is well explored. There are also other authors who deal with such idea in their works, especially those works which tackle the issue of racism and gender discrimination such Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, in which discrimination against the black people is well explored.

This idea can be detected in this short story in more than one situation. When Nunez arrives to this village in which all people are blind, he is the only one who is physically different. That is, having two eyes makes the blind people believe that he does not belong to them as he has a relatively different shape. As a result they start to see him as a foreigner.

Also, when Nunez tells them about the real world which is outside their isolated village, they make fun of him as he talks nonsense to them. They have real faith that there are no any other worlds but this village in which they live. Nunez's attitude towards them and talking about the real world from which he has come make the blind people think that he is hallucinating and thus becomes a foreigner in his thoughts as they do not accept such ideas. This reflects one of the major outcomes of a society that suffers from xenophobia which are the closed-mindedness and inability to understand and then accept new ideologies, especially when such ideologies are brought from different or foreigner people.

Nunez is the only educated person in this village, the only person who can truly see how things look like, and the only person who knows that this is not the real world in which these blind people live and there is the outside real alive world inhabited by people like him. Beside all this, in the country of the blind people, he lacks the knowledge that they have which simply reflects ignorance to Nunez.

These people do not just refuse what Nunez speaks about but they actually do not understand what he speaks about because it is something behind their perception and understanding limits for they were born blind raised by blind fathers and grandfathers. Thus, a community has been created that is really closed-minded occupied by blind people who never realize this truth about themselves.

After Nunez has spent a couple of months in this village, he has fallen in love with a girl named Medina-Sarote who was in love with him too. Nunez thought this might be his chance to find someone who could listen to him while he was talking about sight and the real world. What Nunez gained from this chance was terribly shocking. Medina-Sarote did not believe him and she, like the rest of the blind people, couldn't understand what he was talking about. The shock became even worst to Nunez when the people asked him if

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wants to marry Medina then he pull out those two bumps in his face. Of course these two bumps are his eyes which the blind people claimed to be the source of his madness and hallucinations when talking about sight.

Even though they were in love, but because Nunez is different from her, Medina-Sarote was not able to understand him or to comprehend what he was talking about regarding sight. Her inability to understand him might be perceived as fear from him as he is a foreigner in thought, race, and belongingness.

Eventually, Nunez decides to give up his love for the sake of his sight escapes from this village leaving everything behind and going back to his world to which he belongs and fits the most.

H. G. Wells's ideology is well known through his ideas manifested in his works in general. Wells usually deals with real social matters but the way he uses to present such topics is often fictional. Through *The Country of the Blind*, he tackles the idea of isolated community as an attempt to refer his own society in which he feels he is a foreigner because of his thoughts about religion and secular issues.

Thus, Nunez in fact mirrors Wells in the sense that he has the knowledge that others around him do not have and then becomes a center of fear and hatred produced from people with whom he lives. Nunez's attempts to convince to blind people that there is another fact about the world which is the real one but unfortunately he fails. They do not only disbelieve in him, they also start to hate him and threaten him of pulling out his eyes. This could be taken as a clue that Wells had some kind of resistance toward his own society as long as he used to handle different thought and ideology which, in turn, reflects his isolation among his own community. As a result, his ideology and behavior makes the people, who live in the same society of his, feel xenophobic towards him.

At first glance on the term Xenophobia, it might seem a bit strange and rare to detect at any place. In fact, after studying the detailed meaning of this term and the consequences of its existence in H. G. Wells's *The Country of the Blind*, it appears that it is not only idea of "strange" people who come from a different place. It is more than that, and it is indeed available in our society. That is, people simply feel xenophobic from anyone who simply does not agree with them, or holds different believes, or think in a different way. To be more direct, what has been concluded from this study is that a person of different ethnicity, religion, or origin is going to suffer the exclusion of the society in which this person lives. This exclusion then reflects at most the hatred toward this person by these people and also reflects the fear that he/she might cause some harm.

To sum up, even the society that we live in, since it contains a variety of different ethics, is indirectly a xenophobic society.



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