

Trauma Of Identity And Disorientation In H.G. Wells' "*When The Sleeper Wakes*"

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Abstract

This paper examines the themes of identity crisis and alienation in H. G. Wells' novel *When the Sleeper Wakes*. The story revolves around the protagonist, Graham, who falls into a cataleptic state and awakens 203 years later in a technologically governed dystopian world. The study analyses how Graham's disorienting experience of temporal displacement enhances his feelings of alienation and questions his identity. It also highlights how Graham's psychological distress can be understood via the framework of trauma studies. The novel actively portrays psychological trauma and shows how it shapes Graham's identity and worldview.

Keywords: Alienation, Disorienting Experience, Identity Crisis, Psychological Distress, Trauma Studies.

Herbert George Wells was born on 21 September 1866 in Bromley, Kent, to a lower-middle-class family. Throughout his career, spanning over fifty years, he authored over one hundred books, including more than fifty novels, numerous short-story collections, and a broad spectrum of non-fiction spanning science fiction, social realism, utopian and dystopian speculation, history, popular science, and powerful political discourse. During the late-Victorian and Edwardian periods, amidst the profound changes of the Industrial Revolution and underlying societal anxieties, Wells embraced the era's firm belief in science and development while anticipating its most unsettling dangers. His "scientific romances" address humanity's reckless domination of technology by exploring themes such as time travel, invisibility, interplanetary conflict, and genetic manipulation, transforming speculative fiction into a profound tool for analysing power, class, evolution, and the future of civilisation. Thus, Brian Aldiss referred to Wells as "The Shakespeare of Science Fiction," whereas Charles Fort designated him as "Wild Talent."

H. G. Wells published the novel *When the Sleeper Wakes* in 1899. The story is about a man named Graham who belongs to the nineteenth century who goes into a cataleptic trance after suffering from Insomnia for nearly six days, followed by physical and mental pressure due to overwork, and awakens two hundred and three years later in a dystopian society dominated by technology. Class inequality characterises the society, and constant surveillance controls it. The rulers or the powerful elites control and dominate the working-class people using this technology. Awakened in this type of society, Graham feels disoriented and alienated. Graham came to know that he had become the master and was considered a symbolic figure rather than a human individual. This made him wonder about his identity and his role in this society. Thus, the condition or the suffering undergone by Graham from his Insomnia that leads him to the cataleptic trance and later the experience of physical and mental distress, confusion, fears due to temporal displacement, coping with the present society while discovering his self upon his awakening, makes it a subject for trauma studies.

The word trauma originates from the Greek word τραῦμα, or traûma, meaning "wound" or "hurt". The etymology originates from the Proto-Indo-European word terə-, meaning "to rub, turn," with its variants including twisting, piercing, and boring—essentially depicting the act of causing a wound. In ancient Greek, the verb τῑρῶσκειν (tīrōskein) means "to wound," whereas τετραίνειν (tetrainein) means "to pierce." The term was initially used primarily for wounds and physical harm. The ancient Greeks understood trauma primarily in its literal sense—as physical damage inflicted on the body through violence, conflict, or accidents. Homer's epics, which include the earliest incidences of trauma in European literature, carefully depict injuries primarily caused by combat and sporting events. In an article titled, "Trauma and Treatment in Gillian Flynn's Sharp Objects through Judith Herman's Theories", Mehrgan Rezaeian states that,

Trauma originates from melancholia and Freudian concepts. Loss of loved ones, homeland, country, culture, and other similar entities can lead to depression in individuals. War, immigration, violence, and forceful power can cause psychological trauma, resulting in recurring nightmares, flashbacks, and compulsive behaviour. Loss results in the inability of the subject to accept reality, leading to a state of emotional depression. (86-87)

Thus, according to the Oxford Dictionary, trauma is defined as a mental condition caused by severe shock, stress or fears, especially when the harmful effects last for a long time. In contrast, the Cambridge Dictionary defines it as a severe and lasting emotional shock and pain caused by an extremely upsetting experience, or a case of such shock happening. The American Psychological Association defines trauma as any disturbing experience that results in significant fear, helplessness, dissociation, confusion, or other disruptive feelings intense enough to have a long-lasting negative effect on a person's attitudes,

behaviour, and other aspects of functioning. Overall, trauma refers to both physical and psychological wounds that disrupt a person's physical or mental health as a result of an unpleasant experience, shock, or unexpected injury.

The psychological aspect of trauma developed somewhat later. In 1894, American psychologist and philosopher William James introduced the idea of trauma as a "psychic wound" or "unpleasant experience which causes abnormal stress." James defined psychological trauma as "thorns in the spirit, so to speak." This was the turning point from analysing trauma purely as physical harm to recognising its significant emotional and psychological effects. By 1889, the term "traumatic" was employed in psychology to denote events related to an emotional shock profound enough to alter behaviour. Later, this development gave rise to a field and a literary theory of trauma studies.

Trauma studies emerged as a unique field, blending psychoanalytic theory, literary criticism, post structuralism, and Holocaust studies. The concept of psychological trauma has existed for decades, but the official establishment of trauma studies as an academic subject emerged via the groundbreaking contributions of several prominent theorists. Sigmund Freud established the foundation for trauma theory through his studies of hysteria and neurosis. Later, theorists such as Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, Geoffrey Hartman, and Dominick LaCapra further developed it. An article titled "Trauma Studies" by Michelle Balaev observes the development of trauma studies as,

Trauma studies first developed in the 1990s and relied on Freudian theory to develop a model of trauma that imagines an extreme experience which challenges the limits of language and even ruptures meaning altogether. This model of trauma indicates that suffering is unrepresentable. (360)

Therefore, with an overview of the definitions, origins, and evolution of trauma and trauma theory, the researcher attempts to investigate the protagonist's experiences of suffering in the novel *When the Sleeper Wakes* by H.G. Wells, who suffers from a state of trauma both physically and mentally, as represented by the depiction of the incidents.

The novel's chapter one, titled "Insomnia," opens with a young artist, Mr. Isbister, encountering a distressed man later identified as Graham on a cliff in Cornwall. He is physically weak, limping over his knees with red eyes, and his face is wet. Graham, desperate to speak, hesitatingly said, "I can't sleep." (1) And after a pause, he emphasised his words "I have had no sleep-no sleep at all for six nights." (1) Furthermore, the conversation continues as Isbister asks what he had tried, and Graham replied he had no intention of taking drugs, so he tried exercise. However, it only caused added muscular fatigue to the mental, and the result of this is overwork trouble. In fact, from the very beginning, he has been lonely, and he has expressed it himself when he talks to Isbister as,

"I am a lone wolf, a solitary man, wandering through a world in which I have no part. I am wifeless-- childless--who is it speaks of the childless as the dead twigs on the tree of life? I am wifeless, I childless--I could find no duty to do. No desire even in my heart. One thing at last I set myself to do. "I said, I will do this, and to do it, to overcome the inertia of this dull body, I resorted to drugs. (2)

He had suicidal thoughts thus trying every possible way he restores to drugs because at any rate all he want is to sleep. At last, Isbister asks Graham to accompany him, and he agrees and follows him. However, his physique is so weak that he stumbles and, talking to himself, feels his brain whirling and, upon reaching, he sits on an easy chair, seems almost motionless, collapses, not knowing he is alive or dead, and this is how he falls into cataleptic trance.

This brief description gives a vivid picture of Graham's Insomnia, highlighting how he suffered, his physical and mental distress were damaged, and the isolation he underwent made him desperate for someone to stay by him. Through the description of how Graham feels, the presence of physical stress, psychological pressure and the sense of loneliness signifying the presence and role of trauma on Graham. Wells underscores the physiological and psychological effects of Insomnia: anxiety, agitation, problems with thinking and processing, and an overwhelming sense of existence. These symptoms match what modern psychology identifies as hypervigilance—a common trauma reaction in which the nervous system remains stuck in a heightened state of survival. Insomnia parallels the "pre-traumatic" condition identified in trauma studies, characterised by a phase in which an individual faces unbearable stress that exceeds their coping mechanisms. Wells envisions this contemporary framework by depicting Insomnia not merely as physical distress but as a psychological crisis, indicating an upcoming rupture. The second chapter, titled The Trance, describes that Graham sleeps for very long times that span now some years, and Isbister becomes old. Graham is moved from the hotel to Boscastle, then to London, where he lies in a strange condition, neither dead nor alive, somewhere between nothingness and existence. Warning, Graham's cousin and a solicitor, guards him, and they place Graham in a glass case. His body becomes yellow with a shrunken face, lean limbs and lank nails. Graham unexpectedly enters a deep trance, shifting the narrative from Insomnia's hyper arousal to catalepsy's complete collapse. This movement reflects the dual nature of trauma—shock may present as either excessive activity or complete shutdown. Catalepsy, characterised by immobility, unresponsiveness, and suspended awareness, reflects psychological dissociation. From a trauma perspective, Graham's trance signifies the psyche's complete withdrawal from unbearable internal conflict. Theorists refer to this as a "freeze" response: when neither fight nor flight is possible, the body safeguards itself by removing itself from reality.

When he finally awakes, nearly two centuries later, all is new to him. The first thing he thought was how long had he slept? And then he remembers talking to a stranger and wanting to sleep. He was startled to see him inside a glass, naked and confused and a sense of insecurity about his surroundings. He tries to sit but it seemed difficult to him and he felt giddy weak and was amazed. He struggles to understand his surroundings and notices the splendid and advanced technology. He was trembling covered himself and was still in perplexity he goes to the balcony but soon collapsed limply and fell down as a result of prolonged sleep. This can be viewed as a physical trauma as he struggles to comprehend and stabilise his weak body. People came to visit him. Graham feels strange and cannot understand the language they speak. He could understand that the world had changed so much and thought he must have slept for a long time. He enquired how long he had slept. The people replied many years ago. He has difficulty in accepting it, regretting he has lost his years, and so comforts himself,

"How many years?" he asked

"You must be prepared to be surprised."

"Well?"

"More than a gross of years."

"He was irritated at the strange word."

"More than a what?"

Two of them spoke together. Some quick remarks that were made about "decimal" he did not catch.

"How long did you say?" asked Graham. "How long? Don't look like "that. Tell me."

Among the remarks in an undertone, his ear caught six words: "More than a couple of centuries."

"What?" he cried, turning on the youth who he thought had spoken.

"Who says-? What was that? A couple of centuries!"

"Yes," said the man with the red beard. "Two hundred years."

Graham repeated the words. He had been prepared to hear of a vast repose, and yet these concrete centuries defeated him.

"Two hundred years," he said again, with the figure of a great gulf opening very slowly in his mind; and then, "Oh, but--!"

They said nothing.

"You-did you say-?"

"Two hundred years. Two centuries of years," said the man with the red beard.(21)

This conversation is evident in his dumbfounded, surprised, anxious and reaction when he heard how many years he had slept. This suggests that he experiences psychological shock when he hears the news, unable to accept the fact. This is the hallmark of the psychological trauma he experienced. After this he came to know he is a master and people treat him as a political symbol and a puppet leader rather as a human. He tries to find his role in this society. The council people try to kill him, thus isolating him and keeping him in confinement. It was during this period that he came to understand the society and the prevailing political system. This is where Graham experienced alienation and an identity crisis at the peak, though he was alone throughout the story.

Thus, to conclude, Graham's disorienting experiences create a sequence of trauma responses: hyper arousal and dissociation. The novel's societal setting intensifies trauma rather than resolving it. Graham's awakening set him in a society that exploits his symbolic identity. This external Graham's reflects his psychological breakdown, indicating that trauma is both personal and structural. Therefore, analysing the novel *When the Sleeper Wakes* through the lens of trauma theory reveals that Graham's disrupted sleep is not only a literary device; it represents a psychic rupture. His Insomnia signifies a pre-traumatic state of hyper arousal; his cataleptic trance illustrates dissociation; and his perplexed awakening depicts the survivor's challenge to reintegrate into a world permanently changed.

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