International Journal for Research Trends in Social Science & Humanities
Volume 3, Issue 6
Nov-Dec 2025, PP 1-7

Speculative Technology and Imperialist Ideology Interface: A Study of Wells's the First Men in the Moon

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Abstract- This paper examines H. G. Wells's The First Men in the Moon as a pivotal work that intertwines speculative technology, imperialist ideology, and fin-de-siècle imaginative anxieties. Through the invention of Cavorite and the unprecedented lunar voyage of Bedford and Cavor, Wells constructs a narrative that both anticipates and critiques the technological ambitions of the early twentieth century. The analysis situates Wells's text within the broader tradition of the scientific romance, arguing that the novel uses speculative science not merely as narrative propulsion but as a lens through which to interrogate contemporary assumptions about progress, scientific authority, and human mastery over nature. Equally central to this study is the novel's engagement with imperial discourse: the explorers' attitudes toward the Moon and its inhabitants reflect the hierarchies, exploitation, and assumptions of cultural superiority characteristic of British imperialism. By juxtaposing Bedford's profit-driven worldview with Cavor's more idealistic scientific ethos, Wells exposes tensions at the heart of imperial expansion and technological optimism. Finally, the paper explores how Wells deploys imagination, both as a creative force and a cultural anxiety, to question the limits of human knowledge and the ethical consequences of exploration. Drawing on historical context, close textual analysis, and scholarship on science fiction and empire, this study argues that The First Men in the Moon functions as a complex commentary on the promises and perils of modernity, revealing Wells's ambivalent stance toward the future he helped envision.

Keywords- Technology, Imperialism, Cavorite, Selenites, Telos, Self and Other.

I. Introduction

H. G. Wells's The First Men in the Moon occupies a distinctive place in the evolution of early science fiction. More than a simple tale of lunar exploration, the novel weaves together anxieties and aspirations that defined the turn of the twentieth century. Its narrative follows the unlikely partnership between the pragmatic businessman Bedford and the visionary scientist Cavor, whose revolutionary anti-gravity substance, Cavorite, enables humanity's first journey beyond Earth.

"You are quite clear that the stuff is opaque to gravitation, that it cuts off things gravitating towards each other?

Yes, said I." (The First Men in the Moon 39)

Yet Wells's lunar adventure is far more than an imaginative leap into extraterrestrial space; it is a literary crucible in which technology, imperialism, and cultural imagination intersect. Through this interlacing of themes, Wells offers a prescient

meditation on the promises and perils of modernity. At a time when new technologies were reshaping everyday life and fueling dreams of global domination, Wells employed speculative science not merely to entertain but to provoke critical reflection on its consequences. The creation of Cavorite epitomizes both the marvel and menace of technological innovation. It symbolizes the Victorian belief in scientific progress while simultaneously revealing how such progress can destabilize existing structures of power, ethics, and social responsibility. Bedford and Cavor's voyage, though fictional, mirrors the real-world expansionist drives of the period: the desire to conquer new frontiers, extract resources, and assert human superiority. By transposing these imperial impulses onto a lunar setting, Wells exposes the ideological underpinnings of empire in a way that is at once satirical and unsettlingly familiar.

The novel's depiction of the Selenites further deepens its critique of imperial attitudes. Rather than presenting the Moon as an empty, exploitable void, Wells populates it with an intelligent, socially complex species whose existence challenges human assumptions about civilization and authority. The protagonists' responses to the Selenites, ranging from fear to curiosity to aggression, reflect the broader cultural tensions surrounding encounters with the "other" in colonial contexts.

"It shows the way to maintain authority over the Other in a colonial situation, that is, an imperialist must see the Other as different from the Self; and therefore he has to maintain sufficient identity with the Other to valorize control over it. Politically as well as culturally the Self and the Other are represented as the colonizer and the colonized." (J.M. Cotzee, "Post-colonialism Literature the Concept of self and the other in Coetzee's Waiting for the Barbarians: An Analytical Approach 95").

Post-colonial theory uses the term "Other" to describe the way colonial powers construct colonized peoples as alien, inferior, or fundamentally different in order to justify domination. Although Wells wrote the novel well before post-colonial theory, The First Men in the Moon contains many proto–post-colonial themes that are surprisingly relevant. The Earth characters Bedford and Cavor immediately interpret the Selenites as strange, grotesque, and primitive. Bedford especially uses language that mirrors imperial descriptions of colonized people. He interprets their bodies and caste system as "abnormal" and "inhuman." He describes their first encounters as if entering an "unknown tribe" on Earth. Wells shows how explorers project their own cultural assumptions onto unfamiliar societies, constructing Others through a European imperial gaze. Bedford embodies the imperialist mindset.

He sees the Moon as a place of potential resources, intending to extract wealth. He views the Selenites as obstacles to his ambitions. He frames the encounter in terms of control, fear, and conflict, rather than understanding. His instinct is not to understand the Selenites but to dominate or escape- a classic feature of colonial Othering. "So I only chased the Selenites as far as the first carcass, and stopped there and picked up one of the crowbars that were lying about. It felt comfortably heavy, and equal to smashing any number of Selenites" (The First Men in the Moon 153). Cavor represents a more scientific, seemingly benevolent but still hierarchical attitude. He wants to study, classify, and understand the Selenites.

He initially repeats the colonial dichotomy: civilized Earth vs. uncivilized Moon. Later, however, Cavor experiences a reversal. He comes to see the Selenites as highly organized, rational, and advanced. He eventually admires their society, which challenges the idea that the colonial Self is superior. “In the moon,” says Cavor, “every citizen knows his place. He is born to that place, and the elaborate discipline of training and education and surgery he undergoes fits him at last so completely to it that he has neither ideas nor organs for any purpose beyond it”(The First Men in the Moon 226).

Bedford’s reflexive hostility and Cavor’s cautious respect represent conflicting strands within British imperial consciousness. Through their interactions with the lunar inhabitants, Wells interrogates the moral and philosophical implications of imposing terrestrial values upon alien worlds. Imagination itself becomes a central concern of the narrative, not simply the imaginative leap required to conceive of space travel, but the cultural imagination that shapes how societies interpret the unknown. Wells’s lunar odyssey exposes the dual nature of imagination as both an emancipatory force and a potential agent of domination. By situating scientific romance within the constraints of imperial ideology, Wells highlights how even the most visionary fantasies can remain tethered to the assumptions of their time.

This paper argues that The First Men in the Moon operates as a multifaceted critique of technological ambition and imperial ideology, using the imaginative possibilities of science fiction to reveal underlying cultural contradictions. In tracing the novel’s interplay of technology, imperialism, and imagination, this study aims to illuminate how Wells’s lunar journey reflects, and challenges the complex dynamics of the modern world he inhabited.

Imagination and Technology in H. G. Wells’s The First Men in the Moon:

Kemkar writes about the speculative nature of the novel’s plot and dwells upon the reason behind the choice of such a structure:

Firstly Wells has invented the anti-gravity substance , in defiance of the known laws of the science of physics. The fact that there is no air and no oxygen on the moon is also disregarded by him. That on account of this and the sharp variation of temperature no life is possible on the moon is conveniently ignored by him; for he must people his Moon, not only for the sake of a comparison between the inhabitants of the Earth and those of Moon. Here is therefore, the first surrender of science for the sake of story, as later, we shall discover the surrender of the story of the reformatory purpose. Even here, science is used as a “vehicle for social studies”. (H.G. Wells as a Novelist 33)

Imagination operates as the creative engine of the novel. Wells imagines a world in which the limitations of gravity, long considered insurmountable, can be bypassed through a substance like Cavorite. This act of imaginative world-building places the novel squarely in the tradition of the “scientific romance,” where fiction serves as a laboratory for ideas beyond the reach of contemporary science. Cavor, the eccentric scientist, embodies the imaginative impulse that drives discovery. “Suffice it for this story that he believed he might be able to manufacture this possible substance opaque

to gravitation out of a complicated alloy of metals and something new - a new element" (The First Men in the Moon 30). His willingness to conceive of physical laws differently from his contemporaries enables the creation of Cavorite, and therefore the possibility of space travel. In contrast, Bedford represents a more pragmatic, earth-bound imagination, driven by profit and personal advancement rather than intellectual curiosity.

"Among other things I saw in it my redemption as a businessman. I saw a parent company, and daughter companies, applications to right of us, applications to left, rings and trusts, privileges, and concessions spreading and spreading, until one vast, stupendous Cavorite company ran and rule the world" (The First Men in the Moon 31).

The tension between these two characters highlights how imagination can serve different cultural purposes: one visionary, the other materialist.

Wells also uses imagination as a tool for social critique. By depicting an entirely alien world, the complex, subterranean society of the Selenites, Wells invites readers to question human assumptions about civilization, intelligence, and hierarchy. In this way, imagination becomes not merely an escape from reality but a lens through which reality's limitations and biases are exposed.

"We were flying away from the earth at a tangent, and as the moon is near her third quarter we are going somewhere towards her. I will open a blind" (The First Men in the Moon 39).

Technology in the novel is represented most dramatically through Cavorite, a fictional anti- gravity material. While this invention is fantastical, its significance lies in how Wells uses it to explore the cultural consequences of technological advancement. At the turn of the twentieth century, Britain was experiencing rapid scientific and industrial change. New technologies not only promised unprecedented power, but also raised anxieties about destabilization, militarization, and ethical responsibility. Cavorite embodies these tensions. It promises incredible progress, instantaneous space travel, yet threatens global upheaval. Bedford sees Cavorite as a means to wealth and dominance, reflecting the era's capitalist and imperialist impulses.

In the words of Bedford himself "Suddenly I saw, as in a vision, the whole solar system threaded with Cavorite liners and spheres de luxe. "Rights of Pre-emption," came floating into my head - planetary rights of pre-emption. I recalled the old Spanish monopoly in American gold" (The First Men in the Moon 48). Bedford imagines the future as if he's having a sudden prophetic vision. He sees luxurious spacecraft liners and spheres de luxe travelling across the entire solar system, all made possible by Cavorite.

This shows how quickly his mind jumps to grand, commercial, and imperial possibilities, a network of space travel built for profit and power. Cavor, meanwhile, imagines technology as a gateway to knowledge, communication, and peaceful exchange. Wells deliberately contrasts these views to reveal how technology is never neutral; it becomes dangerous or beneficial only through the intentions of those who wield it.

Moreover, the disastrous consequences of the protagonists' lunar visit, culminating in Bedford's violent encounters and Cavor's eventual captivity, demonstrate Wells's skepticism toward unrestrained technological ambition. Innovation without foresight, he suggests, can produce chaos rather than progress.

Imperialism in The First Men in the Moon:

"Colonialism is a practice of domination, which involves the subjugation of one people to another." (plato.stanford.edu/entries/colonialism/)

The First Men in the Moon is not only an early work of science fiction but also a subtle and often critical exploration of imperial attitudes at the height of Britain's global power. Although the novel centers on a fantastical lunar voyage, it is deeply informed by the logic, assumptions, and anxieties of British imperialism. By transposing these concerns onto an alien world, Wells exposes the cultural mindset that shaped real colonial encounters. The very premise of the novel, two Englishmen traveling to an unknown world, mirrors the structure of imperial exploration narratives. Bedford and Cavor arrive on the Moon with the same mixture of curiosity, entitlement, and strategic thinking that characterized European expansion. Their actions echo the logic of empire: they assume the right to enter foreign territory, observe its inhabitants, and claim its resources without invitation or negotiation. This framing allows Wells to critique imperialism indirectly. By making Earth the intruder on the Moon, he reverses the usual narrative perspective, highlighting the aggressiveness and arrogance inherent in colonial exploration.

Bedford represents the most explicit form of imperial thinking in the novel. Motivated by profit and personal gain, he approaches the Moon as a commodity and potential empire of his own. He quickly imagines the economic advantages of exploiting Cavorite and shows little concern for the consequences his actions might have on Earth or on the Moon's inhabitants. His violent responses to the Selenites reveal a mindset rooted in the imperial belief that indigenous populations exist either as threats to be subdued or obstacles to be removed.

Through Bedford, Wells critiques the greed, aggression, and moral blindness that fuel imperial expansion. The character of Bedford embodies the aggressive, self-interested, and often unconscious ideology of domination that underpinned British imperial culture at the turn of the twentieth century. Bedford's attitudes and actions throughout the novel reveal how imperialist thinking is not limited to national policy but is deeply ingrained in individual psychology and everyday ambition. From the outset, Bedford approaches the lunar voyage not as a scientific or exploratory venture but as an opportunity for personal enrichment.

His mindset reflects what Wells saw as the dominant ethos of late-Victorian capitalism: acquisition, exploitation, and self-advancement. Bedford's fixation on the commercial potential of Cavorite demonstrates how quickly technological innovation can become entangled with economic domination. For him, the Moon is valuable not for its mysteries but for its exploitable resources. This mirrors the logic of empire, where

unfamiliar lands were assessed primarily for their material yield rather than cultural significance. Bedford's first instinct when encountering the Selenites is aggression. He reacts with fear, hostility, and physical violence, behaviour that reflects the imperial belief that colonized peoples must be subdued before they can be understood. While Cavor attempts communication, Bedford assumes that domination is the only viable response to difference or perceived threat. Wells uses these scenes to critique the brutality inherent in imperial encounters; Bedford's violence exposes the fragility of the "civilized" identity claimed by imperial nations.

The following words of Bedford highlight the colonial mindset of imperialism "The moment after I got home with the crowbar in my right hand, and hit the Selenite fair and square. He collapsed - he crushed and crumpled - his head smashed like an egg" (The First Men in the Moon 155).

Bedford frequently interprets the unfamiliar through the lens of human and specifically British superiority. He cannot imagine the Selenites as equals and instead sees them as animals, obstacles, or tools. This inability to recognize the autonomy or intelligence of the Other is a defining feature of imperial ideology.

"The telos of an organ or capacity is the function it plays in the organism as a whole, or what it is for the sake of; the telos of the eye is seeing." (rep.routledge.com)

The Selenite society was very organized which can be interpreted in terms of the Greek term 'Telos' by Aristotle, where every Selenite has its different function to perform. The Selenites' sophisticated society, with its specialization and complex organization, challenges his assumptions, yet Bedford refuses to acknowledge their accomplishments.

His worldview depends on maintaining a hierarchy with humans firmly at the top. Wells reveals that imperial domination is not only a geopolitical system but also a personal disposition. Bedford's ambition, competitiveness, entitlement, and indifference to consequences reflect the psychological foundation of empire. He is not a state official or a soldier; he is an ordinary individual whose behaviour nonetheless reproduces colonial attitudes. In this sense, Bedford symbolizes how empire is sustained through everyday mentalities and desires, not merely political structures.

Bedford's final failure, his inability to understand the Selenites, his collapse into panic and destruction, and his ultimate retreat, suggests Wells's larger critique of imperial ideology. Domination leads not to mastery but to chaos, misunderstanding, and ethical breakdown. The Moon rejects Bedford's imperial approach, much as Wells believed future history might reject the old imperial power structures. Through Bedford, Wells exposes the underlying assumptions of domination, economic greed, cultural superiority, and violent control, that shaped British imperial thinking. Bedford's behaviour on the Moon serves as a microcosm of colonial attitudes, allowing Wells to interrogate and undermine the ideology of empire by placing its logic in an alien environment where it ultimately fails.

Cavor is often read as the moral counterpoint to Bedford, yet he too exhibits imperial assumptions. Although more curious and benevolent, Cavor initially treats the Selenites

as specimens to be studied rather than as equals. His belief that knowledge and communication can bridge the gap reflects a more "liberal" form of imperialism, one that seeks to educate and reform rather than exploit, yet still operates from a position of cultural superiority. Wells uses Cavor to show how even well-intentioned scientific exploration can mimic imperial attitudes when it assumes that one culture's values should guide another's development.

The Selenites themselves serve as a mirror that reflects the imperial structure back at the British reader. Their rigid caste system, specialization, and centralized authority echo the hierarchical logic of empire. At the same time, their relative sophistication challenges human assumptions of superiority. The organized life of Selenites is shown in the dialogue by Cavor, "In the moon," says Cavor, "every citizen knows his place. He is born to that place, and the elaborate discipline of training and education and surgery he undergoes fits him at last so completely to it that he has neither ideas nor organs for any purpose beyond it" (The First Men in the Moon 226). Wells destabilizes the colonial worldview by suggesting that humans, not aliens, may be the less advanced or less ethical species.

The failure of Bedford and Cavor's expedition, marked by violence, misunderstanding, and ultimately the breakdown of communication, underscores Wells's broader critique of empire. The inability of the protagonists to coexist peacefully with the Selenites highlights the dangers of projecting imperial attitudes onto unfamiliar worlds. Wells suggests that imperialism, whether driven by greed or misguided idealism, inevitably produces conflict and moral failure. In The First Men in the Moon, Wells uses the framework of a lunar adventure to expose the assumptions and contradictions of British imperialism. By positioning Earth's representatives as the invaders, he reverses the colonial gaze and reveals the ethical, psychological, and political costs of imperial thinking. The novel becomes not just a work of science fiction, but a sharp commentary on the ideologies that shaped its era, and continue to resonate today.

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