

«THE FLOWERING OF THE STRANGE ORCHID»:  
FROM PLANT SCIENCE TO VICTORIAN HORROR  
FROM A MULTIDISCIPLINARY APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

Plants are organisms whose great biological distance from humans has aroused cultural interest as powerful and/or dangerously unfamiliar creatures, especially during the Victorian period. «The Flowering of the Strange Orchid» (1894), by Herbert George Wells, tells how an orchid collector is attacked to near death by his latest acquisition. The plant attacks the human with its «tentacle-like aerial rootlets», like a vampire feeding on his blood. However, Winter-Wedderburn is saved by his housekeeper, and the plant dies instantly. The story is written at a historical moment of great fascination with orchids and carnivorous plants. Literarily, the story has numerous comparisons to great characters, such as Medusa and her tentacles, Dracula, Carmilla, and even IT. At the same time, it is a story with a strong plant science content, dealing with aspects such as the mechanisms used by orchids to obtain nutrients, their flowering, the importance of «hunting» for the survival of carnivorous plants or the biology of parasitic plants. In conclusion, Wells' story makes an important critique of the way man relates to nature using literary fiction and the cutting-edge plant science knowledge of his time.

KEYWORDS: plants; orchid; Victorian; horror; monstrosity.

## «LA FLORACIÓN DE LA EXTRAÑA ORQUÍDEA»: DE LA CIENCIA VEGETAL AL TERROR VICTORIANO DESDE UN ENFOQUE MULTIDISCIPLINAR

### RESUMEN

Las plantas son organismos cuya gran distancia biológica de los humanos ha despertado el interés cultural como criaturas poderosas y/o peligrosamente desconocidas, especialmente durante la época victoriana. «La Floración de la Extraña Orquídea» (1894), de Herbert George Wells, cuenta cómo un coleccionista de orquídeas es atacado hasta casi la muerte por su última adquisición. La planta ataca al hombre con sus «raíces aéreas tentaculares», como un vampiro que se alimenta de su sangre. Sin embargo, Winter-Wedderburn es salvado por su ama de llaves y la planta muere al instante. El relato se escribe en un momento histórico de gran fascinación por las orquídeas y las plantas carnívoras. Literariamente, la historia tiene numerosas comparaciones con grandes personajes, como Medusa y sus tentáculos, Drácula, Carmilla e incluso IT. Al mismo tiempo, es un relato con un fuerte contenido de ciencia vegetal, que trata aspectos como los mecanismos que utilizan las orquídeas para obtener nutrientes, su floración, la importancia de la «caza» para la supervivencia de las plantas carnívoras o la biología de las plantas parásitas. En conclusión, el relato de Wells realiza una importante crítica a la forma en que el hombre se relaciona con la naturaleza utilizando la ficción literaria y los conocimientos de vanguardia en ciencia vegetal de su época.

PALABRAS CLAVE: plantas; orquídea; victoriano; terror; monstruosidad



### INTRODUCTION

Visual arts in general, and literature in particular, establish —as it is well known— a close connection with sensory data and allow to establish a privileged relationship with obscure, psychic perception, which is mentally projected in the construction of a reality which surpasses our sensible realm. And it is there, consequently, in the visual arts, where the fantastic finds its best place, where the thread of metamorphosis lies, and its reversibility, which unites works and artists with diverse and distant languages. This is a game, teratology, of human, animal, and/or vegetable forms, that art has always known, where there is no limit between natural and supernatural kingdoms, between the animate and the inanimate, the organic and the inorganic.

Within the aforementioned categories, the reader finds various analogous oppositions, with the consequent transgression, around the animate/inanimate axis. By animated it is meant here what is endowed with movement, will and life (even when this life may manifest itself in various concrete forms: human, animal, vegetable). The inanimate has traditionally been associated with inert. In the animated category one can find in turn life/death opposition, understanding the latter as cessation of life (Mendoza, 1993). Sometimes, it can take on fabled traits and sometimes nightmarish tones; and it is there where a perfect harmonious balance can alternate to an orgy of forms in which the monstrous that dwells in the subterranean of the soul bursts (Carotenuto, 1997). It is this, thus, a phenomenology of forms which includes hybridisms, fantasy, anguish and metamorphosis, which implies trying to offer an image which nature is not able to portray.

The critical nonhuman point of view aims to consider the animal, plant, and external forces that surround and influence the human being (Hall, 2011; Laist, 2013; Marder, 2013). At present we cannot deny the importance of pondering the ontological strangeness of plants, despite having been for long inside the area of total darkness. Plants are undeniably different from us; they are utterly unfamiliar, traits which have let them enter popular imagination as terrifying and terrorizing forces. Sometimes they have been adored as deities, others they have been seen as monstrous because of their lack of personality, their impossibility to be set free because of their roots and their -at times- uncontrolled growth.

What we must highlight is that plant horror, plants and all forms of vegetal life, have been shown as the monsters in literature, film, television, comics, videogames, and other media, being represented as threatening to humans, and at times vegetal life being utterly categorized as other. Vegetal life is featured in unexpected ways, in the margins of narratives, usually turning into a predator (Farnell, 2016: 179-196).

Throughout the nineteenth century and, especially, at the fin de siècle, exotic plants were commonplace, usually described as dangerous. By the end of the Victorian period, as the public's fascination grew, plants underwent an evolution: deadly plants went from poisoners to man-killing beings (Butcher, 2019). In fact, they occupy an outstanding position in mid-to-late Victorian fiction, quite close to fantasy, adding detective, adventure, and scientific elements. Plants in late-century non-realist fiction are real characters, endowed with appealing traits for readers (Chang, 2019; Parker, 2020).

It is no surprise the madness caused in the sanest minds, since the late nineteenth century had witnessed an explosion of interest —both scientific

and literary—in the horrifying potential of carnivorous plants (Keetley, 2016: 1-30). The fin de siècle introduced a great amount of sinister plants into citizens' imagination, partly owing to the interest generated by Darwin's *Insectivorous Plants* (1875) (Price, 2013: 312). If Gothic had paved the way for horror and imagination, Darwinism opened up a new space or where unthinkable vegetal beings could emerge. The monstrous vegetal in Victorian fiction highlighted 'the threat of an unconquered and yet highly evolved natural world, focusing fears on an unknown environment (examples include Phil Robinson's *The Man-Eating Tree* (1881), among others). Reports of man-eating plants during the period responded to anxieties about monstrous evolutionary progress.

Literary depictions of such flora were not new (Laist, 2013), but during the nineteenth century readers were aware of a significantly specific new environment: the lost world (Price, 2013: 313). The period between 1871 and 1914 saw a great apparition of lost world novels. The lost world was a fictional space in which readers could reflect upon masculinity and heroism in an imperial, expansive age. It is our intention, thus, to explore the significant encounter between the male hero of the imperial world and the barbarous other in the form of the monstrous vegetal; another that indeed threatens the very core of his manhood. Here, we witness the late Victorian imperial hero ensnared by a carnivorous threat.

«The Flowering of the Strange Orchid» was firstly published on August 2, 1894 in *The Pall Mall Budget*, a weekly digest of articles from *The Pall Mall Gazette*. This short story would later appear in *The Stolen Bacillus and Other Incidents*, a collection published in 1895, containing 15 fascinating short stories by one of the masters of the short story, H. G. Wells. Lastly, it would appear in *The Country of the Blind and Other Stories* (1911). Wells's story was translated into several languages—and reprinted in newspapers as far away as Australia—, having followers as well as imitators (Parrinder and Partington, 2013: 28-47).

Herbert George Wells (1866-1946) was a creative English writer whose production includes a variety of genres: novel, politics and history, among others. Wells, a fair-haired young man, was the son of a former gardener (hence, his interest and knowledge in Botany). Today, he is mostly well-known for his contributions to the science fiction genre thanks to novels such as *The Time Machine* (1895), *The Invisible Man* (1897), and *The War of the Worlds* (1898). If Jules G. Verne was the most widely read and imitated writer in French magazines by his contemporaries, in British ones, the other father of modern science fiction was H. G. Wells (Parrinder and Partington, 2013).

In «The Flowering of the Strange Orchid», one of his more chilling stories, Wells describes the relationship between Winter-Wedderburn, an English orchid collector, and his newly purchased specimen. Wells presents a plant that shows aggressivity and evil intention, portrayed with «tentacle-like aerial rootlets»<sup>1</sup> which grow strong and long enough so as to choke the horticulturist, who is eventually saved, while the orchid dies «black (...) and putrescent». The story represents the terrifying ability of vegetal life to swallow, engulf, overrun, and kill humans (Keetley and Tenga, 2016: 5). The writer offers a vision of a specimen of the vegetal world as a real menace, turning his production into a horror text, which in the end reflects deepened and rooted anxieties within the existing culture.

The story deals with the popular Victorian view of orchids as more than just vegetable beings, even human, capable of inexplicably sinister behaviour (Felgueiras, 1969). In this sense, orchids may be conceived and imagined even as close to human, showing almost intelligence (Chen, 2012: 4), anthropomorphizing botanic behaviours (Whippo and Hangarter, 2009: 2115-27; Haraway, 2015: 159-165).

Fabulous and extraordinary, orchids are symbols of exoticism, exuberance. The orchid hunt has been a constant; not surprisingly, orchids have suffered because they are rare and because they are beautiful. In the 19th century, orchids were sought after compulsively. In any case, these refined flowers, with delicate or sumptuous corollas, stand out for their class, crowned by an aura of fascination and mystery that belongs only to them. What is more, man and orchid share the privilege of occupying symmetrical strategic positions at the top of the animal and plant kingdoms. Orchids, like men, have conquered the entire planet: they live in all continents, support all climates, with a predilection, however, for tropical regions. But there are species that inhabit Alaska, Siberia and even Greenland. To adapt to such diverse living conditions, they have demonstrated that they possess a great capacity for imagination

The Horticultural Society of London was founded in 1804. The Victorian tradition of orchid horticulturism led such collectors to consider them as specimens with several sensibilities, imagining themselves linked to their plants in a mutually built-up relationship. However strange this may seem, it talked about plant intelligence, conceiving plants not as simple, dull, motionless, insensitive beings but as organisms with a capacity to receive, store,

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1 For all the references to the text, we follow the version provided by the Project Gutenberg (Wells, 2019).

share, process, and use information from the environment (Brenner *et al.*, 2006: 414, 417; Cole *et al.*, 2011: 96-97; Pollan, 2013).

It is not a coincidence that Charles Darwin himself made a reference to them on the very first page of his *The Various Contrivances by which Orchids are Fertilised by Insects* (1890) when he stated that orchids are universally acknowledged to be ranked amongst the most singular forms in the vegetable kingdom (Griffiths, 2015: 431-452). So daring and so boring is Winter-Wedderburn's life that he dreams of imitating Darwin: «I have often thought of making researches as Darwin did'». This short story helped spread the impact of Darwin's revolutionary botanical ideas.

Feeling a deep attraction to orchids more than to any other plants, Victorians were fascinated by what they considered were their appealing characteristics: their sensitivity, their capacity for interacting with elements surrounding them; and they considered that included humans (Voskuil, 2017: 19). Having said this, the name of a variety of orchid may be no surprise: it is demon flower, characterized by its fetid smell forbidding approach. Orchids were clearly endowed with uncanny features, exerting a sort of magic influence.

#### SCIENCE FOR VICTORIANS

For Victorians, science was somehow unstable, characterized by varied methods of research. «The Flowering of the Strange Orchid» deals with the imaginings that may occur in an alternative scientific environment in nineteenth-century Britain (Clark, 2011). This short story suggests the notion that objectivity and falsifiability, facts and beliefs, rational analysis and suppositions, life and death, impulses and reason, human and *unhuman* (let us use this term) are somehow natural partners (Bennett, 2010: 21). Consequently, «The Flowering of the Strange Orchid» places a wide variety of apparently opposite fields facing one another.

And it cannot be a mere coincidence that many of the adventurous *fin-de-siècle* productions are characterized by the combination of scientific aura mingled with an appealing interest in the occult: topics such as regression, the threat of barbarism, and heroes turning weak are among the most common ones (*Dracula*, *Strange case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, and of course Well's short story are a great example). Victorian society fears the diminution of opportunities for adventure and heroism. Freakish flora seems to try to attack the male body, linking the otherness of the lost world with deepened anxieties

attending Victorian conceptualizations of masculinity. Botanical life turns into the *fin-de-siècle* literature that brings an updated Gothic, full of degeneration. Considering this, it is easy to document Victorian fascination with carnivorous plants (Farnell, 2016: 179-196).

When reading «The Flowering of the Strange Orchid», the writer manages to evoke a sense of the curious felt both by the Victorian reader as well as by us at present day. This short story offers a feeling of wonder and an aura of liminality, a division between a scientifically objective reality and a truly strange world.

The reader is surprised, like the protagonist, by the unusual, fantastic and aggressive game of the plant world, which seems to transform into something animalistic, human, lethal, confusing and transforming itself. Here the clear and inert borders that traditionally divide these natural kingdoms seem to have disappeared; here, those borders are masterfully overcome. Nor is the usual stillness typical of plants perceived: within the perfect and stable universe where the protagonist lives, the reader witnesses a metamorphosis, producing a transmutation (Mendoza, 1993; Burke, 2014).

The grotesque materializes in an anguished and sinister reality, all of this occurring in a world in which the ordinances of our reality are suspended, that is, the clear separation of the domains reserved for the plant, the animal and the human, the aesthetics, symmetry and the natural order of proportion.

This short story shows what can be defined as unconventional in a supposedly balanced Victorian society. And what is more, by presenting this story, Wells conceptualizes a margin, boundary line in a way that is totally different from the scientific limits and sphere that characterize science studies (Fichman, 1997: 94-118; Gieryn, 1999; Warwick, 2006: 1-16).

When the reader finishes this short story, it shows uncertainty and instability as some of the main characteristics of Victorian thinking, spurring a profound sense of wonder, a sense which was not rare in an age of rapid scientific advancement and discovery.

Considering such a view of science in the Victorian period is particularly important because it was at this time that the idea of modern science, as we now conceive it, began to take shape. It is not a coincidence, thus, that in Britain, the first meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science took place in 1831 (Karpenko & Claggett, 2017: 5-6). In fact, the Victorian period was a time of free and open exchange between science and culture. This was due in part to the accessible language used by scientific writers,



whose work was being published in popular periodicals (Cantor & Shuttleworth, 2004; Otis, 2009). As Wells commented soon after «The Flowering of the Strange Orchid» was published, «fiction is widening its territory. It has become a mouthpiece for science, philosophy and art (...) You cannot blame science for welcoming so popular an expression» (Interview with Wells, *Weekly Sun Literary Supplement*, 1895, quoted in McLean, 2009: 2).

In a masterful subtle way, Wells' short story «The Flowering of the Strange Orchid» tells of a Western protagonist who grows a flower from the Orient, the exotic flower meaning the far-away region in Western popular culture, similarly to what *Dracula* will show between Transylvania and London.

Starting from the fluidity of the (de)limitations set at the heart of Victorian scientific practice, it is undeniable that objects of Victorian time—in this case, plants—lacked stable definitions, expanding, thus the limits of what can be considered a plant as a living organism belonging to the vegetable kingdom (Gaycken, 2012: 51-69; Chang, 2019). Wells' short story explores the subversion of the conception of plants as unconscious entities (Farnell, 2016: 179-196). The orchid is endowed with murderous capacities (Chase *et al.*, 2009: 329-5; Arment, 2010; 2013; 2014).

Placing this story inside the late nineteenth-century fiction genre about killer plants (Arment, 2010; 2013; 2014; Butcher, 2019; McCausland, 2021: 481-509), the plot suggests an intentionality in plants; what is more, it addresses the possibility of a certain degree of plant consciousness (Miller, 2012: 460-479; Price, 2013: 311-327). The suspicion that plants possessed some form of intelligence was one that grew on Darwin as he developed his work. Wells' masterful production deals with the possible relationship existing between the thinking plant and the human, giving rise to a new concept of consciousness. What provides this tale with its emotional force is the fact that the plant seems to sense its surroundings, including the presence of humans to prey upon, able to react intelligently in order to trap its victims (invariably male).

Considering that fascination, we should recall Erasmus Darwin's poem «The Loves of the Plants» (1790), placing the idea of evolution as a precursor to his grandson Charles Darwin (Beer, 2017: ix). In the four-canto, heroic couplet «The Loves of the Plants», Darwin puts imagination next to science (Browne, 1989: 593-621; Page, 2005: 150).

In «The Loves of the Plants», Darwin argues that the plants he is talking about are animate, living beings, just like humans. Darwin's use of personification suggests that plants are closer to humans than the reader might think at first (Browne, 1989: 606-619; Packham, 2004: 197-198). However, plants gen-



dered as female by Darwin's grandfather do clearly lack the predatory and intelligent sexuality that characterizes the killer orchids.

In this sense, H. G. Wells is a central writer when talking about the evolution of scientific romances in modern scientific fiction. He became a real master in topics such as time travelling, alien invasion, biological mutation, future cities and dystopias (Luckhurst, 2005). And the short story we are dealing with here talks about man finding an alternative life.

Together with the notion of vegetable intelligence and will, the idea of deadly plants undoubtedly attracted the Victorians (not exclusively orchids; let us bear in mind the Venus flytrap which eats insects, a fact that had only been completely understood barely two decades before this short story we are dealing with was released). Thanks to Wells' fertile imagination, orchids showed a hypnotic influence on man through its beauty. The result was a sort of vampire flower, which attacked human beings and sucked the blood out of them (Endersby, 2016: 129-156; Fitzpatrick, 2020). The orchid in «The Flowering of the Strange Orchid» is a key concept around which nature (its origin) and civilization (the house it enters)<sup>2</sup> spin around; be as it may, civilization is restored when the housekeeper violently smashes the glass turning inside outside. Here we clearly see the opposition of wilderness and civilization. Opposed to Winter-Wedderburn's partial vision, his cousin speaks of air «loaded with scent,» her uncle «worshipping that horrid orchid.» It can be observed once again the intelligence-like showed by the orchid, when the narrator refers to the odour felt in the air; in fact, it was «a rich, intensely sweet scent», standing above the rest of the plants kept in the hothouse. The strong trace left by the orchid is easily followed as a trail, and Winter-Wedderburn paths straight to the orchid, hurrying down towards the «overpowering sweetness». But this feeling is not always positive, since immediately the narrator states the scent was really insufferable. His feelings seem to be lying to him. It was not for nothing that when entering the hothouse, his cousin noticed that «the air was very close (...) loaded with an intense perfume», even making «her head reel».

As the one who finally «drag[s] him away from the horror» she can be considered as the real hero, turning into the most reliable character. From the very beginning she does not hesitate when looking at the plant for the first

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2 This featured vampire plant may have influenced the blood-drinking vegetable alien in the film *The Thing from Another World* (1951). This adaptation of a story by the north-American writer John Wood Campbell (1910-1971) would become one of the classics of science fiction, establishing archetypes that have been repeated up to day. The film has become one of the paradigms of horror and science fiction, influencing a great amount of cinema that has come after.

time and stating: «I don't like the look of it'». Upon seeing the plant, and its «aerial rootlets», the whole reminds her of «tentacles reaching out after something». What is more, the narrator confesses to the reader the tentacles had appeared in her dreams, explaining why she hated it so much, since sleep is essential for a person's sanity. But even worse is the fact that she dreamt that the tentacles/aerial roots were growing towards her. In other words, she felt that the tentacles were rapidly coming for her. When reading the text, the readers feel rootlets resemble those of an octopus', or rather similar to the head of the Medusa, as if they were part of fiction becoming real and part biological reality, and its rootlets apparently blurring the boundaries between life and death.

The story depicts the opposition between the modern, artificial world (whose main example is Winter-Wedderburn), and the primitive natural world represented by the orchid, a two-fold witty device that appears in many other of Wells' productions. Civilization is questioned since Wedderburn's housekeeper must use violence by smashing the windows to restore a civilised order (a device which is not so far from vampiric productions, i. e. *Dracula*, where hunters use violence to destroy defenceless Lucy).

#### THE ABJECT OTHER

In H. G. Wells' short story «The Flowering of the Strange Orchid», an introverted Englishman faces a sort of carnivorous orchid,<sup>3</sup> despite the fact that, so far, no insectivorous orchids are known. The protagonist, an amateur orchid collector bachelor in his fifties called Winter-Wedderburn,<sup>4</sup> is a «shy, lonely, rather ineffectual man» living a quiet life, becoming «bright and garrulous (...) in the glory of his strange adventure». What is more, he is so wealthy, and he is so dull that he does not have «enough nervous energy to make him seek any exciting employments (...) Winter-Wedderburn is fully aware of his condition, since he even claims «Nothing ever does happen to me». He misses excitement, and he perceives that feeling in any single activity of the world, even in misfortunes as his friend Harvey's chicks suffering from staggers, or even Harvey's cousin breaking his ankle. He misses all that complaining and

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3 It was only in the late twentieth century that an orchid species, *Aracamunia liesneri* was discovered, being strongly suspected of carnivory.

4 Let us pay attention to the playful alliteration of the name. Also, let us bear in mind that winter refers to the season of death, as opposed to spring and summer.

wishing at the same time: «What a whirl of excitement! -compared to me.» He desires, he needs something to happen in his full of boredom life: «I knew something would happen to-day. And I have bought all these. Some of them (...) I feel sure, do you know, that some of them will be remarkable. I don't know how it is, but I feel just as sure as if someone had told me that some of these will turn out remarkable.» He yearns for whatever kind of adventure. The story is a variant of a common fantasy theme, translated into literature and cinema frequently under the warning «be careful what you wish for». Wells offers a happy ending: not only is Wedderburn's life saved and the plant destroyed, but he is pleased by the adventure for which he was longing.

After having purchased a mysterious orchid at an auction in London, the «exultant tentacles» of the orchid try to capture and feed on him, but he is saved thanks to his housekeeper, his «remote cousin», who destroys the orchid. He was quite busy working in his hothouse, fascinated and engrossed by the mysterious orchid. He was willing to share the news about his new orchid, and constantly «he reverted to his expectation of something strange». So, as we are seeing, the strange plant outstands within the boundaries of the hothouse. The cultivated planting within the domestic boundaries of home, this liminal space of controlled Nature witnesses plant, showing the ambiguity of civilising domesticity and savage wilderness as a gendered metaphor that not only troubles dichotomous female identity in the patriarchal imagination but challenges a modern masculinity (Crosby, 2020: 51-53).

Winter-Wedderburn tells the story of the original collector (called Batten) of the strange orchid with relish. This original orchid-collector died while travelling abroad. Winter-Wedderburn explains that his body was found with «every drop of blood (...) taken out of him by the jungle-leeches». In this sense, Wells' choice of this animal, traditionally associated to the blood-draining creatures, cannot be a coincidence. And the symptoms experienced by Batten are not so far from the traditional ones felt by vampire victims: «He had been unwell for some days with some kind of native fever, and I suppose he fainted». Here we find of the common symptoms: fever and faintness. And anticipating his own horror, Winter-Wedderburn misses that state: «Fancy dying away from every comfort in a nasty swamp! Fancy being ill of fever with nothing to take». Winter-Wedderburn envies Batten, even though he is now dead.

Eventually, Winter-Wedderburn learns that the orchid-collector was drained of blood by the same orchid that he has bought. On returning home he shows off his new plant to his housekeeper who instantly dislikes the plant (a fact that she will openly state throughout the story), finding it openly repul-

sive. She remarks that the rhizome «looks like a spider shamming dead». The unnamed female cousin housekeeper presents a contrasting voice to Winter-Wedderburn throughout the story, focusing upon the horrific orchid (Keetley, 2016: 1-30). In fact, she can be read as a voice of reason. Following the canonical, traditional detective stories, at times she speaks as a real detective: «And just think, there has been a dead body lying across that ugly thing!». From that moment, she will not be able to avoid thinking of that corpse.

A truly disturbing vision of monstrosity permeates this story. The orchid represents a liminal state between life and death (Gaycken, 2012: 51-69; McCausland, 2021: 481-509). The first paragraph of the text states that it is difficult to tell a dead orchid from a latent one. In fact, the orchid combines its liminal deathliness with an uncannily human-like behaviour. What is more, it is very interesting to highlight the use of the word shamming, indicating not only intentionality, but also to be pretending, that is, an intelligence.

The housekeeper observes that the rhizome starts growing, developing aerial rootlets that look like «little white fingers (...) trying to get at you», associating them with the corpse of the original orchid collector (later the orchid «[clings] with the grimmest tenacity to its victim»). Here, science fiction plays its greatest role, since instead of being just a plant, something to be collected by man, it appears to be interested in collecting humans (Diaz, 2018).

The orchid tries to transfer its deathliness to Winter-Wedderburn; they swap roles and the narrator refers to the unconscious man as «the inanimate body». All in all, the orchid and the vegetable kingdom are a real threat. The orchid disturbs and blurs the borders that separate life from death, man —as predator— from plants —as victims—, civilized society from primitive beings. In a quasi-vampiric behaviour —just as Dracula will show just some years later— the orchid threatens England, penetrating the core of the empire (represented by the human body). The strange orchid does no longer remain lifeless, daring to contaminate —and destroy— English society (Keetley and Tenga, 2016). Winter-Wedderburn will confirm that some of the plants he purchased started to die notwithstanding his care, whereas «the strange orchid began to show signs of life». In this sense, it is no surprise that both productions saw life with hardly no difference: 1894 and 1897 (Fitzpatrick, 2022). The trope of the femme fatale emerges as the dark, chaotic, irrational, wild side of femininity. The femme fatale has long been a figure in literature of the wicked seductress and sexual enchantress, who narcissistically manipulates the men around her for her own rewards; a monstrous Other within the dichotomous perspective of idealised/vilified woman in the male imagination. Victorian

representations of women tend to polar extremes, depicting females as symbols of either domestic happiness or wicked monsters. This dichotomous relationship of the female is projected onto carnivorous plants, in fin de siècle fiction particularly. Indeed, the femme fatale motif is equated with a «praying mantis, a vampire... predatory instincts... predominant characteristic[s] of the fatal woman» (Luczynska-Holdys, 2013: p.4-5). We suggest that the plant monster should be included in this list.

The orchid is both a menacing and seductive being. It is bestowed with human traits by Winter-Wedderburn, referring to the strange orchid as «his new darling»; he reacts to the «overpowering sweetness» of its scent with an «ecstasy of admiration». The plant produces three large white flowers with an overpoweringly sweet fragrance and Winter-Wedderburn is delighted with its scent. Winter-Wedderburn is excited from the very moment of having purchased his new orchid, since it presents a unique variation: some of its roots are exposed to the air. White men have travelled far in order to collect these beautiful, yet savage orchids, being themselves oblivious of the risk (in a similar way it happens in «Carmilla» and *Dracula*, two of the most outstanding vampire productions threatening the Empire from the outside). Winter-Wedderburn's strange orchid is an abject, parasitic entity —threatening and alluring at once— willing to feed on the blood of Englishmen. The vampiric plant shows «unexpected mimicry,» eventually attacking and nearly killing its naïve owner, whereas the short story presents the fears of British empire being invaded by Eastern monsters.

Notwithstanding, Winter-Wedderburn begins to feel sick and unsteady, collapsing at the door of the hothouse. The housekeeper enters and finds him lying on the floor, facing up, with a full mess of the orchid's rootlets (let us recall the leach-like suckers) attached to his neck and hands, leaving him white and bleeding, with «a little thread of blood». The orchid «clung with the grimmest tenacity to its victim», but she manages to drag him away from the monstrous plant.

She manages to drag him free and destroy the plant. Luckily, Wedderburn makes a full recovery, despite having lost «a good deal of blood». The importance of womanhood cannot be left out: on the one side, an empire man is saved by a woman; secondly, a sort of female opposition can be observed here —while the male protagonist just worships it— (McCausland, 2021: 481-509). He almost falls into the exotic, feminine orchid's alluring trap.

The threat has arrived and settled at the very the heart of the empire, whose central place was occupied by white men who travelled into the jun-

gles willing to collect these savage objects of admiration and delight. During Victorianism, the term *orchidelirium* was used to describe the sudden outburst of the obsessive compulsion to discover, acquire, collect and adore orchids. After 1804, when the Horticultural Society of London was founded, plant expeditions soon began, trying to get and bring to the heart of the Empire the best, rarest example. During that *orchidmania* time, myriads of scientific missions rushed for new species, often implying the health—or even the lives—of those who invested fortunes on collecting them (Endersby, 2016: 205-229).

Winter-Wedderburn's strange orchid is an abject, parasitic entity attempting to feed on the blood of Englishmen. The orchid thus turns into an alluring, threatening entity, whereas Winter-Wedderburn is unaware of the real threat («[It] slowly unfolds before the delighted eyes of the happy purchaser»). And what is more, this threat is not another English white man, but something referred to as IT, precisely the same pronoun that will be used for Dracula. The seed of corruption has been placed in the core of the society. It will be only once, quite at the development of the plot, that the protagonist will openly affirm, ignoring his fate: «There are such queer things about orchids».

Here, Darwin's theory of natural selection cannot be more accurate: certain organisms are more successful than others at surviving. Success is linked to survival, which in turn means that the fittest beings manage to continue the species. Some species can be naturally selected by the processes of Evolution. The white race was considered to be at the top of the supremacy, while natives were associated to inferiority. Apparently, white (English) population had been selected by evolution.

Wells' «The Flowering of the Strange Orchid» combines amateur botany<sup>5</sup> with science fiction, creating an unforgettable tale of reverse colonization. This short story reveals the link between the notion of empire and the threat of a foreign being which is full of thirst for human blood. What is more, the orchid is feminized, coming from a supposedly inferior place, and it is ostensibly queer (the very example of Carmilla). Just like Dracula, the orchid threatens England, but it manages to enter since the collectors are the ones who open the windows and doors of their houses. Let us remember that *Dracula* was published in 1897, a novel about degenerate, parasitic foreigners invading the English empire. Both the vampire and the orchid are but just two invading monsters, embodying degeneracy (Hurley, 2004; Asma, 2009). «The Flowering of the Strange Orchid» and *Dracula* highlight the seductive poten-

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5 We must take into account the fact that at the beginning of the nineteenth century, Botany had been popularly considered a feminine task.

tial of the other. These creatures embody perversity, queerness and threat. They desire only blood, and purity is threatened: in *Dracula*, threats come from the monster to man; in «The Flowering of the Strange Orchid» a feminized entity tries to seduce and kill man, being both examples of disruption and weirdness. Let's recall Queer Theory (Halberstam, 2002: 344-367; Halberstam, 2020; Garrard, 2010: 73-96; Graham, 2014).

We witness in this text, in fact, the anxiety of the male body being attacked by the uncannily active and predatory plant body, and the result—a horrifying yet fascinating view—offers a deep concern about the threat posed by foreign environments to masculine integrity. And at this point we cannot avoid considering the importance of Edward Said's postcolonial studies (Mishra and Hodge, 2005: 375-402; Al Mtairi, 2019: 1-10; Thomas, 2012: 155-168).

The colonial other manages to travel to England. The orchid stands out as an example of a non-human uncanny entity, “threatening revenge upon the colonizer” (Diaz, 2018: 4). Having this fact in mind, the rapid spread of literature concerning alien invasion cannot be a coincidence (H. G. Wells published the immensely famous *The War of the Worlds* in 1898).

#### PLANT SCIENCE IN WELLS'S STORY

Plant science is defined as the study of plants in its different disciplines. The main research areas in plant science are botany and plant physiology, but it includes lines of research in other multidisciplinary areas, such as biochemistry, cytology, histology, cell biology, genetics, evolution, biogeography or agricultural production (Allaby, 2019). Although plant sciences have been developed since the origin of agriculture, with the domestication of crops, and even since the harvesting of fruits, avoiding harmful ones, it is in the last century when its development skyrockets, with the studies of genetics and the management of agricultural nutrients (Zeigler, 2019: 2-3).

Orchids have been a focus of interest for collectors, scientists and professors of plant science for hundreds of years (first description in China in 1233). This is because the orchid family (*Orchidaceae*) is one of the most diverse in the plant kingdom, with over 20,000 different species, and because of their *strange* way of life. These plants need to associate with soil fungi for their seeds to germinate (something that does not happen with other plants), and their main way of life is on other plants (behaviour called *epiphytism*), which means that they do not develop *normal* subway roots (Pérez-Gutiérrez, 2010:



1-3). Orchids live mainly on trees, but they are not parasitic plants that feed on the sap of their hosts, but due to their symbiotic relationship with fungi they are able to absorb nutrients present in the atmosphere, hence the absence of root hairs on their roots (they are really fastening systems, not nutrient intake) (Zhang *et al.*, 2018: 196-198). These thickened and dendriform roots can reach up to 1 meter in some occasions (Zhang *et al.*, 2018: 196-198), being a correct comparison to the one made about the orchid rhizome in Wells' story: «looks like a spider shamming dead».

One of the most attractive aspects of orchids is their flowering. This is due to the rare shapes of their flowers and their long floral lifespan, with a great diversity of floral forms, sizes, colours, fragrances, and textures. If there is one aspect of these flowers that is especially striking, it is that their pedicel rotates 180°, allowing the labellum to be situated in the lower part of the flower to form a platform for pollinators (Zhang *et al.*, 2018: 197-198). This justifies Winter-Wedderburn's great fascination with its acquisition and the power of attraction that the orchid has.

In addition to the importance that Wells' story gives to orchids, there is a close relationship with carnivorous plants, a totally different group. Winter-Wedderburn is attacked by a plant that feeds on him, which obtains nutrients from his body. This is precisely the basis for the classification of this group of plants. Carnivorous plants include 800 species very different from each other. Evolutionary, these plants have developed a series of specialized traps (sticky, slippery, mechanical, etc.) that allow them to kill and subsequently digest their prey (mainly insects, but also many other small animals). After digestion, the plants are able to absorb the nutrients that previously made up the body of their prey. This form of plant life is a consequence of its development in places with scarce nutrient availability, causing a strong selective pressure to obtain nutrients from external sources, in this case, animal prey (Cross, 2019: 209-210).

However, the carnivorous behaviour of a plant entails a great investment of energy, both to create the traps and to carry out the digestion of the prey. If the trap fails to catch a prey, but is «triggered», for example, by the rubbing of a large animal, the plant will begin the digestive process without any prey from which to obtain nutrients. This energetic investment «without reward» is so great that it kills the plant (Freund *et al.*, 2022: 44-49). This situation is already described by Wells for the strange orchid, when Winter-Wedderburn is saved by his housekeeper when he is being attacked by the rhizomes of the plant, which consume his blood. Winter-Wedderburn's

housekeeper deprives the orchid of its prey, and it dies within hours, due to a great investment of energy with no reward. In this sense, it is interesting how Wells posits carnivorous behaviour in an orchid, being ahead of his time. To date, only one orchid has been described with a possible carnivorous behaviour (in 1989), the species *Aracamunia liesneri*. Although this orchid has not been described with total certainty as carnivorous, it has sticky glands at the base of its leaves, very similar to those developed by different carnivorous plants (Steyermark and Holst, 1989: 962-964).

On the other hand, the use of the rhizomes as «tentacles» with which the orchid sucks the blood of its victim, would actually be more related to the way of life of parasitic plants. This group of plants feed on other plants by inserting a tentacle-like structure (called a *haustorium*) into the body (stems or roots) of other plants. In this way, the parasitic plants absorb the sap of their victims. Within this plant group are popularly known plants, such as mistletoe (*Viscum* spp.), a parasite of pine trees. But there are other plants such as dodders (*Cuscuta* spp.) that do not have the shape of a plant but are strings or tentacles that stick to different plants and feed on their sap (Yoshida *et al.*, 2016: 643-656; Twyford, 2018: 857-858).

The last aspect pointed out by Wells in relation to plant sciences is the production of a «hypnotic aroma» by the strange orchid. The production of scent by orchids is an evolutionary mechanism of reproduction that Wells uses in this case as a tool for the plant to catch its prey (Winter-Wedderburn). The vast majority of orchids need to be pollinated by animals (insects, primarily) to form seeds that perpetuate the species. In order to attract insects to the flowers, orchids synthesize and release into the atmosphere volatile chemical compounds that «hypnotize» the insects to come into contact with the flower and carry their pollen to another flower (Milet-Pinheiro and Gerlach, 2017).

## CONCLUSIONS

«The Flowering of the Strange Orchid» is a tale about the dangers of interfering with nature and its consequences. This short story is a warning tale about humans vs. nature. It also clearly says that humans cannot always tame nature. Another lesson to be learned lies on the fact that, despite its immense yet deadly beauty (Eco, 2004), the natural world is often dangerous, even lethal.

In this short story, the fantasy narrated in the final part derives from two different phenomena: first, from the palpable contrast between the de-

scribed context and what is referred to as objectively verified: the vegetable roots coming to life, a fact that can be considered as an exploration in the irrational, the illogical, the strange, evoking the explorations into the irrational made by the surrealists. Added to this is the fact that the narrator has previously offered a series of information that will mark the contrast between the context and the reported event, a narration intended to produce an effect through the development of the unlikely, the strange, what is out of place, representing a vegetal nature that defies the laws of logic.

H. G. Wells, using literature, deals with the concept of the evolution. He makes the reader question himself about the supposedly privileged status of humans. In this scientific production, the reader ultimately is forced to consider the beginning and ending of humans' dominant status on Earth.

By showing the changing representation of monstrous vegetation in literature, the author provides the reader with a new and thought-provoking area of consideration on monstrosity. This way the gothic scene is forged; that vegetable prison architecture —maybe for future research it would be highly interesting to review the language used and the atmosphere of mystery and oppression established— creates an oppressive, macabre, morbid, sinister, gloomy environment, from which the main character can no longer flee, being himself trapped in his own house.

Showing up in all its horror this hell of transgressions, we reach a last moment of hesitation before what is narrated —uncertainty that is caused by the vampiric plant— as we wonder if this story is or is not something real; whether it is an event explainable by our human rules or if, on the contrary, there is no possible explanation. Plant horror leads to a discussion of what abject means, dealing with the two sides of the same semiotic element, being aided by chaos, inversion and the suspension of cultural limits, forcing us to establish the limits of our known world.

This is one of the first literary examples where hematophagy is not exerted by animals and insects, but it is transferred to the plant kingdom. In doing so, Wells created one of the greatest literary tales featuring a blood sucking plant feeding on human prey.<sup>6</sup> The uncanny plant, blurring the boundaries of human and nonhuman, is portrayed as a sort of *eco-femme-fatale*, a real ecoGothic monster.

Killer orchids were among many lethal plants that lurked and preyed the imaginations of their cultivators in the late nineteenth century. Dangerous

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6 See an illustration from the weekly magazine *Pall Mall Budget* (1894) in Coyne (2022).

orchids seemed to haunt their owners everywhere (playing on the dichotomy of who possessed whom), ready to devour naïve humans at every opportunity. This was undoubtedly a popular (and successful) genre. One can easily wonder why orchids became such killers in Victorian imagination. What cannot be denied is that this is one of Wells' most effective short fiction stories, and we consider it was almost certainly the inspiration for the B series film *The Little Shop of Horrors* (1960).<sup>7</sup>

Finally, Wells has a great knowledge of plant sciences, which is reflected in his story. Not only does he describe and play with physiological mechanisms of various groups of plants, but he is ahead of his time, considering orchids as carnivorous or parasitic plants, something not described at that time (Farnell, 2016: 179-196).

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<sup>7</sup> Directed by Charles B. Griffith and being one of Jack Nicholson's first films, a musical comedy was released on Broadway in 1982. In 1986 another version was shot changing its name to *Little Shop of Horrors*. In 1991, we find a cartoon series named *Little Shop*. This adaptation of a story by John Wood Campbell (1910-1971) is one of the classics of science fiction, establishing archetypes that have been used once and again up to the current day. This film has become one of the paradigms of horror and science fiction, influencing all the cinema that came after.

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