



## THE ORIGINS AND CLASSICS OF ENGLISH SCIENCE FICTION: HERBERT WELLS AND KHOJIAKBAR SHAYKHOV IN A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

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### Abstract:

This article presents a comparative-typological study of the science-fiction works of Herbert George Wells, founder of the scientific romance in English-language literature, and Khojiakbar Shaykhov, the leading representative of Uzbek science-fiction prose. The study traces the genesis of English science fiction, establishes the place of the fantastic mode in each author's creative heritage, and identifies both typological parallels and national-cultural distinctions in their artistic worlds. Analysis covers the concept of time and space, the image of the scientist, plot structures, artistic devices, representations of scientific and technological progress, the future of humanity, and moral-philosophical issues. Results demonstrate that, despite stable genre invariants, both authors create original artistic systems deeply rooted in their respective national traditions.

**Keywords:** English science fiction, origins of science fiction, Herbert Wells, Khojiakbar Shaykhov, typological parallels, Uzbek literature, comparative literary studies, scientific romance, image of the scientist, utopia and dystopia, national identity.

### Introduction

The history of world literature offers numerous examples of phenomena that emerged in different cultural environments yet reveal remarkable structural and thematic similarities. Among the most compelling is the parallelism between English science fiction of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as represented by Herbert George Wells, and Uzbek science-fiction prose of the second half of the twentieth century, whose most prominent representative is



Khojakbar Shaykhov. A comparative study of these two writers allows us not only to identify the genre constants of science fiction but also to understand how national and cultural contexts transform common genre models, endowing them with fundamentally different spiritual and ideological content.

The relevance of this study rests on three factors. First, contemporary literary scholarship maintains a sustained interest in genre typology within science fiction. Second, despite his artistic significance, Khojakbar Shaykhov has rarely been the subject of comparative literary research, and his contribution remains underexplored in the international academic context. Third, the study illuminates the dialogue between European and Eastern literary traditions in an era of cultural globalization. The aim of this article is to provide a comprehensive comparative-typological analysis of the science-fiction works of H. G. Wells and Khojakbar Shaykhov. The methodological framework draws on scholars of science-fiction theory (D. Suvin, B. Aldiss, P. Parrinder), comparative literature (V. M. Zhirmunsky, D. Dd'urisin, N. I. Konrad), and Uzbek literary studies (U. Normatov, B. Karimov).

## 1. The Origins of English Science Fiction and Wells's Contribution

Science fiction did not emerge in isolation; its roots extend into utopian, travel, and natural-philosophical literature. Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516) established the imagined space as a platform for social experimentation. Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis* (1627) placed science at the center of an ideal polity. Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) employed the fantastic premise as social satire, and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) first posed the question of the scientist's ethical responsibility — questions that would remain central to the genre.

The immediate predecessor of Wells was Jules Verne. Yet, as Wells himself observed, a fundamental distinction separated their artistic systems: "Verne starts with the known and proceeds toward the unknown; I begin with the impossible and move toward the probable"<sup>1</sup>. Verne's fiction extrapolates existing technologies; Wells proposes a bold speculative premise and develops it according to the laws of logic and probability.

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<sup>1</sup> Bergonzi B. *The Early H. G. Wells: A Study of the Scientific Romances*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1961. – P. 8.

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Herbert George Wells (1866–1946) created what he called the scientific romance. Its defining difference from later American science fiction lies in the fact that Wells’s speculative premise the novum, in Darko Suvin’s terminology functions as an instrument of philosophical and social inquiry rather than as an end in itself. Suvin describes Wells’s method as “cognitive estrangement”<sup>2</sup>: the reader is placed in an unfamiliar situation and thereby compelled to reconsider what had previously seemed self-evident. *The Time Machine* (1895) transforms temporal travel into a tool of class analysis; *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896) explores the boundaries between humanity and animality; *The Invisible Man* (1897) raises questions of power and impunity; and *The War of the Worlds* (1898) reverses the imperial perspective by turning the English themselves into the colonized. Wells received his scientific education under Thomas Henry Huxley, Darwin’s foremost advocate, and this shaped his evolutionary understanding of humanity: his characters are biological beings subject to natural selection, giving rise to the dark dialectic of progress that pervades his fiction.

## 2. Uzbek Science Fiction and the Work of Khojakbar Shaykhov

Uzbek science fiction developed under conditions fundamentally different from those of Western Europe. On one hand, it evolved within the Soviet literary system, which viewed the genre both as scientific-technological propaganda and as a relatively free space for artistic experimentation. On the other hand, it drew nourishment from the rich heritage of classical Eastern literature the poetry of Alisher Navoi, Omar Khayyam, and Rumi, and the narrative tradition of *One Thousand and One Nights*. This dual context determined the distinctive character of Uzbek science fiction: a synthesis of contemporary scientific concerns with Eastern narrative forms and the moral-didactic orientation of classical literature.

Khojakbar Shaykhov (b. 1944) is the most prominent representative of this tradition. His science-fiction prose particularly novels and novellas written between the 1970s and 2000s is distinguished by an organic fusion of modern

<sup>2</sup> Bergonzi B. *The Early H. G. Wells: A Study of the Scientific Romances*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1961. – P.8.

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scientific discourse with the parabolic imagery of the Eastern classical tradition. As the Uzbek literary scholar U. Normatov observed, Shaykhov’s works reinterpret “the moral and didactic potential of Eastern literature through the prism of modern scientific conceptions of the world”<sup>3</sup>. Unlike many Soviet science-fiction writers whose work focused on technological achievement and scientific optimism, Shaykhov places the human being at the center of his artistic universe. Scientific discoveries and extraordinary phenomena acquire value only insofar as they illuminate ethical, spiritual, and philosophical questions.

Shaykhov extensively employs the form of the Sufi parable with its characteristic figures: the traveler in search of truth, the wise sage (donishmand) who preserves hidden knowledge, and the trial leading to spiritual enlightenment. The figurative language of the Eastern classical tradition becomes in his prose an instrument for interpreting the most pressing issues of modernity technocracy, alienation, and the spiritual crisis of civilization. For Shaykhov, science fiction is not a separate literary domain but a pervasive artistic principle in which the boundary between the real and the marvelous is deliberately blurred.

### 3. Time, Space, and the Image of the Scientist

The interpretation of time is perhaps the most revealing point of typological convergence between the two authors and the clearest example of their culturally conditioned divergence. In *The Time Machine*, Wells accomplished a genuine revolution in the literary conceptualization of temporality, declaring through his narrator that “there is no difference between Time and any of the three dimensions of Space except that our consciousness moves along it”<sup>4</sup>. Time is understood as a physical reality traversable mechanically. By contrast, Shaykhov’s conception of time is spiritual and cyclical, governed not by mechanical laws but by the moral laws of existence. Space in Shaykhov’s works carries symbolic dimensions: the steppe, the mountain, and the oasis are not merely geographical realities but images of the spiritual journey rooted in the Eastern narrative tradition. Both authors regard time as an active force shaping

<sup>3</sup> Normatov U. *Ma’naviy uyğonish*. Toshkent: Sharq, 2001. – B. 145.

<sup>4</sup> Wells H. G. *The Time Machine*. London: Heinemann, 1895.Ch. I.

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human destinies, but Wells rationalizes this activity through the language of physics, while Shaykhov interprets it through ethics and moral philosophy. The central figure in the science fiction of both authors is the scientist a person who transgresses the established boundaries of knowledge. Wells’s scientist embodies Western Prometheanism: he seeks to conquer nature and challenge the very foundations of existence. Doctor Moreau creates hybrid creatures; Griffin achieves invisibility but is socially and morally destroyed; Cavor invents an anti-gravitational substance and perishes, unable to cope with the consequences. As the scholar Mark Hillegas observed, the Wellsian scientist is a “genius without a conscience”<sup>5</sup>, and it is precisely this absence of an ethical dimension that becomes the source of catastrophe.

In Shaykhov’s works, the scientist performs a fundamentally different function. The Uzbek literary tradition has developed a stable archetype of the scientist-sage (donishmand), the guardian of knowledge as the highest moral value. Shaykhov’s scientist invariably fulfills a didactic role: even when he commits a mistake or transgresses a moral boundary, he ultimately arrives at repentance and spiritual purification. The fundamental difference is that Shaykhov’s scientist remains capable of spiritual healing and moral redemption, whereas Wells’s scientist is generally doomed to irreversible catastrophe. This contrast reflects broader cultural differences: in the Western rationalist tradition, knowledge is a powerful force that can escape ethical control; in Shaykhov’s universe, knowledge is inseparable from wisdom and moral responsibility.

#### 4. Plot Structures and Artistic Devices

At the level of plot structures, both authors actively employ the motif of the trial: the protagonist is placed in an extreme situation generated by a scientific premise and compelled to seek a way out. However, the criterion of success differs fundamentally. For Wells, the cognitive outcome is paramount: the Time Traveller returns from the future bearing a disturbing insight into the ultimate degeneration of humanity, and this knowledge constitutes the semantic culmination of the narrative. For Shaykhov, the moral outcome is paramount:

<sup>5</sup> Hillegas M. R. *The Future as Nightmare: H. G. Wells and the Anti-Utopians*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1967. – P. 83.

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the trial leads to spiritual enlightenment, and this inner transformation becomes the true climax.

In narrative organization, Wells typically employs a frame structure that creates an illusion of authenticity the gathering around the fireplace in *The Time Machine*, or the eyewitness account in *The War of the Worlds*. Shaykhov likewise uses framing devices, but invests them with different meaning, often drawing on the traditional Eastern model of dialogue between a sage and a disciple. Wells is a master of dense, analytically precise narration in which every detail contributes to the central idea. Shaykhov tends toward a meditative, contemplative mode of narration enriched by philosophical dialogues, lyrical digressions, and poetic insertions characteristic of Eastern storytelling traditions. Both authors make extensive use of defamiliarization (*ostranenie*), presenting familiar reality from a fundamentally new perspective through a fantastic premise. In Wells, this technique is primarily intellectual: the desolate future landscape in *The Time Machine* functions as a magnifying lens directed at the class contradictions of Victorian England. In Shaykhov, defamiliarization assumes a predominantly moral and symbolic character; fantastic space serves as a metaphor for the protagonist’s spiritual condition. Both authors also employ archetypal images of destruction and renewal Wells through ruins of fallen civilizations symbolizing the fragility of progress, Shaykhov through images of nature’s revival symbolizing spiritual rebirth performing a similar artistic function across different cultural traditions.

### **5. Scientific Progress, the Future, and Cultural Identity**

Wells’s attitude toward scientific and technological progress is profoundly ambivalent. As a committed socialist, he argued that science and rationalism represented the only path toward a better future. Yet his science-fiction novels consistently demonstrate the dangers of uncontrolled progress. *The War of the Worlds* reverses the imperial perspective: the technologically superior Martians bring not civilization but destruction, allowing Wells to critique British colonial expansion. The narrator observes that before condemning the Martians too harshly, humanity must remember its own ruthless destruction of weaker

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peoples<sup>6</sup>. Likewise, *The Time Machine* demonstrates that technological progress does not guarantee moral progress: the Eloi, freed from labor by technology, have become physically and intellectually weakened. This contradiction between Wells's declared faith in progress and his artistic skepticism gives his science fiction a distinctive dialectical power.

Shaykhov approaches the theme of progress from the perspective of Eastern moral philosophy. Within the value system of Eastern culture, rooted in Islamic epistemology, a fundamental distinction exists between external knowledge (*'ilm al-zāhir*), encompassing technical sciences, and inner knowledge (*'ilm al-bāṭin*), which concerns the spiritual comprehension of truth. Technology belongs to the former sphere and can never substitute for the latter. A scientific discovery possesses value only insofar as it contributes to the spiritual growth of the individual. Both writers arrive at a similar ultimate conclusion that technological progress is insufficient without corresponding moral development but reach it through fundamentally different paths: Wells through sociological extrapolation, Shaykhov through the moral parable.

Wells's artistic world emerges from Victorian England with its social contradictions, imperial self-consciousness, and premonition of crisis. A characteristic feature is the deliberate depersonalization of the protagonist: the Time Traveller has no personal name; Griffin becomes a literal invisible man. This reflects a fundamental artistic principle: the Wellsian reader is concerned not with an individual biography but with the fate of humanity as a species. Shaykhov's artistic world, by contrast, was shaped by the classical Eastern heritage Navoi, Babur, Fuzuli, the Sufi lyrics of Rumi and Hafez, and *One Thousand and One Nights*. At the center of each of his works stands a concrete individual with an inner world, moral aspirations, and spiritual journey, reflecting the Eastern narrative tradition's view of the individual as a unique soul striving toward perfection (*kamol*). His synthetic artistic system organically integrates the traditional and the modern, the Eastern and the Western, the realistic and the fantastic.

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<sup>6</sup> Wells H. G. *The War of the Worlds*. London: Heinemann, 1898. Ch. 1.

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## 6. Typological Parallels and National-Cultural Differences: A Synthesis

The comparative analysis reveals the following principal parameters of similarity and divergence:

**Genre Nature.** Both authors work within a genre based on cognitive estrangement (Suvín), whereby the fantastic premise functions as an instrument for reinterpreting familiar reality. However, Wells develops the scientific romance as an intellectual experiment governed by clearly defined logical principles, whereas Shaykhov transforms the genre into a moral and symbolic parable.

**The Image of the Protagonist.** Wells generally depersonalizes the protagonist, turning him into a type or narrative function. Shaykhov consistently portrays a specific individual with a unique spiritual journey. The scientist in Wells is often a “genius without a conscience,” destined for tragedy; in Shaykhov, the scientist is a wise donishmand capable of repentance and spiritual renewal.

**Attitude toward Progress.** Both authors critically assess unrestrained technological progress. Wells expresses this through sociological extrapolation and typically gravitates toward tragic endings. Shaykhov conveys the same insight through the moral parable, tending to preserve the possibility of spiritual redemption.

**The Concept of Time.** Wells physicalizes time, transforming it into a fourth dimension of space. Shaykhov spiritualizes time, interpreting it as a moral and ethical reality. Both writers regard time as an active force shaping human destinies.

**Narrative and Philosophical Orientation.** Wells focuses on humanity as a biological and social species, exploring large-scale historical processes. Shaykhov centers his attention on the individual, emphasizing personal moral growth and spiritual perfection. Consequently, Wells’s fiction tends toward

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social and civilizational critique, while Shaykhov’s works are more closely associated with ethical and philosophical reflection.

The comparison demonstrates that the typological parallels between the two authors are profound, arising from the shared genre invariants of science fiction. At the same time, their national and cultural differences reveal that science fiction is not a homogenizing form; on the contrary, it proves sufficiently flexible to accommodate fundamentally different worldviews, philosophical systems, and artistic traditions.

### Conclusion

Herbert George Wells stands at the origins of the scientific romance as an independent literary form combining a fantastic premise with intellectual social analysis. His works of the 1890s and early 1900s not only laid the foundations of English-language science fiction but established genre models of worldwide influence. Khojakbar Shaykhov, working within a different cultural and historical context, adopts and transforms these models, enriching them with the value system of the Eastern moral and philosophical tradition.

The typological parallels between the two authors encompass several levels: the conceptualization of time and space, the interpretation of the scientist, the use of science fiction as an instrument of social and moral criticism, and narrative structures based on the motifs of trial and frame narration. These parallels testify to the existence of genre invariants within science fiction that transcend national and cultural boundaries.


At the same time, the national and cultural specificity of each author determines the profound originality of their artistic worlds. Wells is a representative of Western European rationalism, Prometheanism, and social criticism; his science fiction is oriented toward a cognitive and intellectual outcome. Shaykhov is an heir to the Eastern literary tradition with its synthesis of poetic imagination and moral reflection; his science fiction is directed toward a spiritual and ethical outcome. Nevertheless, both authors share the conviction that technological progress without corresponding moral development inevitably leads to catastrophe.

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The study of these two authors opens new possibilities for dialogue between Western and Eastern literary traditions, demonstrating that genuine universality in literature is achieved not through the abandonment of national identity but through its deeper exploration and creative realization. A promising direction for future research lies in examining the reception of Wells in the Uzbek tradition of translation and literary criticism, as well as in a broader comparative analysis of other representatives of Uzbek science fiction within the global evolution of the genre.

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