



Science fiction — to read or not to read

Science Fiction (s-f) is suspect, even though it is all around us. Movies, television, videogames and comics — in fact, a host of media — use the s-f form. Despite that wide exposure, or perhaps because of it, many of us refuse to accept s-f novels and short stories as legitimate literature. It simply isn't regarded as worthy of our time and consideration. In addition, it is suspect for religious reasons as well, since most s-f writers do not include the Creator in their conceptions of the universe. I believe that these reservations and doubts find their basis not in experience, but in prejudice. *Science fiction literature is worthwhile, if only we understand its nature.*

S-f — a definition

It is always fruitful to turn to history for definitions. Themes common to s-f appeared in early fantasy literature. Voltaire, the French philosopher of the Enlightenment, wrote on space travel, and Jonathan Swift, in *Gulliver's Travels*, described alien cultures. The first s-f novel, however, was written by Mary Shelley, wife of the romantic poet. Her work, published in 1818, was entitled *Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus*. This book has been misunderstood because the monster has been inaccurately portrayed for modern consumption. Science fiction in the "modern" sense appeared towards the end of the nineteenth century, when Jules Verne and H.G. Wells produced what were called "scientific romances." Wells' *The Time Machine* and *The War of the Worlds* still stand as respected s-f works.

Development shifted from Europe to America, where, in 1926, Hugo Gernsback founded a s-f magazine entitled *Amazing Stories*. It published only s-f and was widely read. Soon many such magazines appeared, with the unfortunate result that s-f was relegated in the public mind to the not-quite-respectable field of pulp magazines. Gaudy and lurid cover illustrations only reinforced the common opinion that s-f represented a subliterate. This notion has persisted.

In the late 1930s, however, John W. Campbell Jr., editor of *Astounding Science Fiction*, set out to restore the reputation of s-f by setting rigorous standards for his magazine. Stories not only had to be true to science, but also had to be well-written. Ray Bradbury, Isaac Asimov, and Robert Heinlein, among others, began writing in this period and benefitted from the new standards. Since the 1940s there has been a reappraisal of s-f, especially after the medium was used by authors such as Orwell and Huxley. Today most university and college English departments offer courses in s-f.

Science fiction writers often present their own definitions of s-f. Theodore Sturgeon, an accomplished novelist, wrote that

a good science fiction story is a story with a human problem, and a human solution, which could not have happened at all without its science content.

Kurt Vonnegut has defined s-f through the words of the main character of one of his novels. In an address to a convention of s-f writers this character declared

I love you ... you're all I read anymore. You're the only ones who'll talk about the really terrific changes going on. You're the only ones with enough guts to really care about the future, who really notice what machines do to us, what wars do to us, what cities do to us ... You're the only ones zany enough to agonize over distance without limit, over mysteries that will never die...

So much for a definition of science fiction. Despite Vonnegut's eloquence, the question still remains whether the s-f medium is valuable and worthwhile. *Why is literature, in general, valuable?*

Because it fulfills two primary functions. First, it delights and entertains, and second, it teaches. If s-f novels and short stories accomplish these two purposes, then they merit our readership.

To delight and entertain

Literature has the capability of delighting us by means of its content and form, and s-f has traditionally been accused of not meeting standards in this area. That s-f writers pay little heed to character development is a popular criticism. In many cases this is true, because s-f often concentrates on plot and setting, which are its strengths. Mainstream writers had a restricted number of settings within which to work. The plot had to unfold in desert, temperate or polar regions, in the city or country, and within recognizable societies. Science fiction writers are liberated from much of this, and must develop their physical and sociological settings from scratch. The best s-f writers are very good at this aspect of writing and can produce intriguing settings that are remarkably different from anything earthly.

Another strength of s-f authors is plot. Stories are usually fast-paced because the writers have learned to combine setting development with plot development. Thus what is lost in characterization is frequently compensated for elsewhere. As a result, s-f has produced interesting innovations in writing form.

To teach

The second purpose of literature is to teach ideas, values, and attitudes. If we think about that, the question arises: Do we wish to be taught by authors who are not Christian? This applies to mainstream literature, and certainly to s-f, since few s-f writers openly advocate Biblical norms. To read or not to read s-f?

Christians indeed have a monopoly on Truth with a capital "T." However, man was endowed with the capacity to reason, and on the basis of this gift he can make true statements about life, the human condition, and the society in which he finds himself.

Although these insights have been stated by unbelievers, they are nevertheless valuable and worthy of study because they help us to apply our beliefs to modern questions such as euthanasia and the effects of a computer-dominated society. With proper caution, then, we can read and analyze the work of s-f writers, who educate in two ways. They teach us lessons without actually intending to do so, and they sometimes set out to convey certain beliefs and ideas.

The unintended lessons

Everyone involved in a cultural activity, be it architecture, music, philosophy, sculpture, or writing, cannot help but reflect and express the basic beliefs of the society in which he lives and works.

Thus we can easily distinguish at least three important modern beliefs in science fiction (s-f) writing:

1. Belief in change. Modern Western society worships change, and some scholars have asserted that all change is progress. The essence of s-f is that this is an ever-changing world. Every s-f novel or short story presents some form of a changed world; the reader is taught, perhaps unconsciously, that he must accept change even if particular developments seem unfavorable.
2. Belief in science. Modern science and technology have made tremendous strides in all fields in this century, and consequently science has become a god. Science fiction serves as the mythology of this false religion in several ways. It asserts that nothing is to be deemed impossible, that man's rational scientific mind can even work miracles such as teleportation and time travel. *Many s-f stories illustrate what man, in combination with his scientific knowledge, can accomplish.*
3. Humanism. A third and final belief underlying much s-f writing is the philosophy of humanism. Modern man believes that he can "pull himself up by the bootstraps," and s-f writers return to this theme time and again. One example will suffice to illustrate this.

Stephen Vincent Benet (1893-1943) is known primarily as the poet who won the Pulitzer Prize for "John Brown's Body," a narrative poem about the American Civil War. He also wrote a s-f short story entitled, "By the Waters of Babylon." The hero, a young man in his late teens, lives in the Eastern United States after the "Great Burning," which has destroyed civilization and reduced man to tribal society. His quest is to discover the nature of the gods who inhabited the great cities which are now "dead places." With great exhilaration the young man comes to realize that the gods were men. Now he is confident enough to conclude "we must build again." Although Benet witnessed the destructiveness of modern warfare, he maintained his faith that mankind will prevail. Even after a great holocaust man can and will rebuild.

In a well-known short story, "The Machine Stops," E.M. Forster explores much the same theme. He, too, asserts that, although mankind may follow terrible dead ends in technology and societal organization, he will ultimately survive and express his true humanity in culture.

The intended lessons

Like other writers, s-f authors also set out to teach certain lessons. The writer has generally regarded himself as a seer or prophet whose task it is to interpret his society, to examine the nature of man, and to evaluate and examine life.

Science fiction writers have the additional task of exploring the philosophical, psychological, and sociological implications of modern technology.

In the prophetic role of the s-f author three separate aspects can be distinguished: the desire to sound a warning, the willingness to advance certain values, and the preaching of a recognizable philosophy.

George Orwell and Aldous Huxley used the s-f mode to warn society against potentially dangerous trends. *1984* is a chilling story portraying a totalitarian regime which siphons off dissent by conducting a mock revolution, and controls thought through language and the constant rewriting of history. It is interesting to note that *1984* and *Brave New World* are regarded as "classics" even though they clearly belong within the realm of s-f.

A less eminent writer of s-f, Walter Miller, wrote a story, "I Made You," to provide an image of how modern technology can kill man. The hero, a scientist, comes to the moon to disarm a self-propelled, self-activating cybernetic defense robot. Turning on the man, the machine eventually kills its creator, who dies deeply aware of the great irony, screaming "I made you," at the renegade robot. In this story we see that ancient Greek notions of hubris and nemesis are still in use.

Proud man lifts himself up, and is cut down by retribution. Capable of building a great technology, man nevertheless has to suffer its negative effects.

A brief example will illustrate the desire of some s-f writers to convey certain values. Robert Heinlein, a very successful s-f novelist, wrote *Starship Troopers* in order to explore the relationships between warfare, politics, and morality. His personal view of the nature and origins of morality is easily discernable. At one point he says,

"A scientifically verifiable theory of morals [What a monstrosity! — G.A.] must be rooted in the individual's instinct to survive — and nowhere else!"

Heinlein does not keep his readers in the dark about his own ideas, opinions, and beliefs, and consequently his novels are much more than good entertainment.

Any of Kurt Vonnegut's novels could serve as an example of s-f being used to express a philosophy. In *The Sirens of Titan*, Vonnegut seeks to write a parable to illustrate the antiphilosophy of existentialism. (Having only a layman's knowledge of existentialism, I will define it as that belief which holds that the universe and man have no *given* meaning.)

One of the characters of *Sirens*, Salo, represents a civilization hundreds of thousands of years old. The Tramalfadorians have decided to distill all their knowledge and philosophy into one message;

Salo is taking it across the galaxy. At the conclusion of the story the reader discovers the content of the message. When Salo opens the letter, all it contains is a dot: Tramalfadorian for "greetings."

That's not the worst. Salo has been stranded in Earth's solar system because of a malfunction in his spacecraft. Since Tramalfador is so distant, Earth has been chosen to produce the replacement part. As it turns out, the great architectural monuments of Earth were nothing more than messages which the Tramalfadorians had caused earthmen to make. The Great Pyramids of Giza told Salo, "Wait patiently." The human heroes of the novel are brought to despair by the knowledge that earth's civilization and cultures have existed only to produce a spare part. "Life is only a series of accidents," concludes the hero, Malachi Constant, the faithful messenger.

Vonnegut returns to his existentialist theme in novel after novel. He is a prophet with a non-message.

The apostle John enjoins us, in the fourth chapter of his first letter, *"to test the spirits, to see if they are from God."* Despite the suspicion with which it is viewed, science fiction constitutes a good tool by which we can assess thought-patterns, "the spirits" of the society in which we live.

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