

Overview of Science Fiction

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ABSTRACT:

Science fiction, as a genre or division of literature, distinguishes its fictional world to one degree or another from the world in which we actually live; a fiction of the imagination rather than observed reality; a fantastic literature.

Science fiction reconfigures symbolism for our materialist age. It is this materialism once again that distinguishes the effectiveness of the science fiction's use of symbol from the widespread use of symbolism in other literature. E.g. the trope of the Invisible Man is one we might think of as a classical science fiction novum. H.G.Wells wrote a short novel on this theme in 1897. The difference between this science fiction and Ralph Ellison's celebrated novel of Black American experience, also called Invisible Man (1952) a book never described as science fiction- has to do with the operation of this novum in the text itself. Ellison's protagonist is invisible because people simply don't see him, and they don't see him because he is black. His point, in other words, is to express metaphorically through the trope of the invisible man, the social invisibility and alienation that are part of the experience of being black in America.

KEYWORDS : Science Fiction, Reconfigures, Imaginative, Literature

I. INTRODUCTION :

Science fiction, as a genre or division of literature, distinguishes its fictional world to one degree or another from the world in which we actually live; a fiction of the imagination rather than observed reality; a fantastic literature.

The 'Oxford English Dictionary' defines science fiction as 'imaginative fiction based on postulated scientific discoveries or spectacular environmental changes, frequently set in the future or on other planets and involving space or time travel'.

Novels and short stories written in what is generally known as science fiction were

certainly produced before the 1920's. e.g. - in the late 19th century, written by H.G.Wells and Jules Verne. Some critics assert that the 1st science fiction story comes from even earlier than that. Mary Shelly's **Frankenstein** (1818), the story of a strange new form of life created by science, has been put forward as the first science fiction. They were earlier called, 'Gothic tales', 'fantastic stories', or 'Scientific romances' etc. It was not until the 1920's that these sort of writing became identified as belonging to a family of literature-science fiction.

It is equally impossible in strict scientific terms to manipulate DNA to create dinosaurs in the ways required by Michael Crichton's book, **Jurassic Park** (1993) or to design spaceships that can travel between the stars like **Star Treks** USS Enterprise. But it is a part of the logic of science fiction, and not of other forms of fiction, that these changes are made plausible within the structure of the text. This means that the premise of a science fiction novel requires material, physical rationalism, rather than a supernatural or arbitrary one.

A critic, Darko Suvin, has usefully coined the term 'novum' the Latin for 'new' or 'new thing', to refer to the point of difference; the thing or things that differentiate the world portrayed in science fiction from the world we recognize around us. A science fiction text may be based on one novum, such as the device that enables H.G. Well's hero to travel through time in **The Time Machine** (1895). This novum must not be supernatural, but need not necessarily be a piece of technology.

Darko Suvin in 1979, has defined science fiction as 'a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the authors empirical environment'

It is a discourse built on certain logical principle's that avoids self-contradiction: that is rational rather than emotional or instinctual.

According to Gweneth Jones (1919: 16) 'Science in science fiction has always had a tactic meaning other than that commonly accepted. It had nothing in particular to say about the subject matter, which may be just about anything so long as the formal conventions of future dress are observed. It means that, whatever phenomenon or speculation is treated in the fiction, there is a claim that it is going to be studied to some extent scientifically that is objectively rigorously; in a controlled environment. The business of the writer is to set up the equipment in a laboratory of the mind such

as the ‘what if’ in question is at once isolated and provided with the exact nutrients it needs’.

According to another critic, Robert Scholes, science fiction is both different and the same, both discontinuous from our world and also confronting that world in some cognitive way.

For him, science fiction is permeated by ‘an awareness of the Universe as a systems, a structure of structures’.

According to another critic, Damien Broderick, a science fiction author, ‘science fiction is that species of storytelling native to a culture undergoing the epistemic changes implicated in the rise and super cession of technological industrial modes of production, distribution, consumption and disposal. It is marked by:

1. A metaphoric strategies and metonymy tactics
2. The fore-grounding of icons and interpretative schemata from a collectively constituted generic ‘mega-text’ and the concomitant de-emphasis of ‘fine writing’ and characterization
3. Certain priorities more often found in scientific and postmodern texts than in library modally: specifically, attention to the object in preference to the subject. (1995:155)

The ‘novum’ of science fiction is a part of the imagined world that stands in for the process of a whole environment; whereas the whole science fiction text operates metaphorically.

Science fiction is that popular genre that shares many features with other ‘pulp fictions’ and popular modes, a ‘de-emphasis on fine writing’. Science fiction is popular because it is populist, that it is an adolescent mode of writing that it is not ‘serious’ or ‘high art’. Books that take the following subjects, themes, trappings or props are thought of as science fiction:-

1. Spaceships, interplanetary or interstellar travel
2. Aliens and the encounter with aliens
3. Mechanical robots, genetic engineering, biological robots (androids)
4. Computers, advanced technology, virtual reality
5. Time travel
6. Alternative history
7. Futuristic Utopias and Dystopias

Science fiction reconfigures symbolism for our materialist age. It is this materialism once again that distinguishes the effectiveness of the science fiction's use of symbol from the widespread use of symbolism in other literature. E.g. the trope of the **Invisible Man** is one we might think of as a classical science fiction novum. H.G.Wells wrote a short novel on this theme in 1897. The difference between this science fiction and Ralph Ellison's celebrated novel of Black American experience, also called **Invisible Man** (1952) a book never described as science fiction- has to do with the operation of this novum in the text itself. Ellison's protagonist is invisible because people simply don't see him, and they don't see him because he is black. His point, in other words, is to express metaphorically through the trope of the invisible man, the social invisibility and alienation that are part of the experience of being black in America.

Well's protagonist, on the other hand, is a scientist. His invisibility is specifically rationalized as a reason of scientific research. The particular alienation experienced by Well's invisible man stems from his own anti-social personality, which in turn is an expression of the way science denies common nature and humanity. Ellison's invisibility is a transcendent device, in the sense of being something that transcends or passes beyond conventional literary expectations; it is a means of metaphorically apprehending the experience of a whole group of people. Well's is a concrete symbol of dehumanization of science, a particular coding of the very materiality of science's practice.

According to Scott McCracken, 'at the root of all science fiction lies the fantasy of alien encounter. The meeting of self with other is perhaps the most fearful, most exciting and most erotic encounter of all. (1998:102).

Science fiction provides a means, in a popular and accessible fictional form, for exploring alternative. Specific science fiction nova (plural of novum) are more than just gimmicks and much more than clichés; they provide a symbol grammar for articulating the perspectives of normally marginalized discourses of race, gender, of non-conformism and alternative ideologies.

The energy of youth has a part in play in constructing science fiction. As quoted by Roger Luckhurst, 'an adolescent and exuberantly kinetic genre'. (Lockhurst-1997: 4) Scott McCracken points out that 'science fiction is enormously popular. It accounts for one in ten books sold in Britain and in one in four in United States. (1998: 102)

Science fiction clearly constitutes a wide range of varying discourses: short stories, novels, films, TV shows, comics, video games, pop music etc. In the so-called ‘Golden Age’ of science fiction, from the late 1930’s through to the early 1960’s, the term ‘science fiction’ has a greater degree of coherence. It refers to a particular body of texts that were, specifically founded in science and the extrapolation of science into the future. Science fiction uses the trapping of fantasy to explore again age-old issues, or in other way, the chief mode of science fiction is not prophecy but ‘nostalgia’. There have been hundreds of thousands of science fiction texts throughout the 20th century, but only very rarely- statistically no more than would be expected by the operations of chance-have any of those texts accurately predicted anything.

Jules Verne predicted that men would fly to the moon, but he also thought that firing capsules out of cannons would be a good way of propelling people on this space voyage; when in fact the suddenness of the acceleration would squash the astronauts like bugs. H.G.Well’s predicted the invention of tanks and aerial bombing. But he didn’t realize that life in space would be weightless and confidently predicted that a world- wide government of scientists and rational men would create a global Utopia by the 1950’s. Science fiction actually exacts a fascination with the past.

Istvan Cricsery Ronay Jr. puts it- ‘science fiction has ceased to be a genre per se, becoming instead a mode of awareness about the world’. (1991:308).

Science fiction does not project us into the future; it relates to us stories about our present and more importantly about the past that has led to this present.

II HISTORY OF SCIENCE FICTION :-

According to a science fiction critic, Peter Nicholas, a cognitive, scientific way of looking at the world did not emerge until the 19th century. (Clute and Nicholas- 1993:8)

Brian Aldiss sees Mary Shelley’s **Frankenstein** (1818) as the first science fiction text; the original scientific fable about the power of scientist to create, matched with the unforeseeable nature of the consequences of that creation.

Both the writers, H.G. Wells and Jules Verne, have been called ‘The Fathers of Science Fiction’ and their influence of its development has been enormous in the 20th century. Science fiction has much in common with the sub- genre of Gothic fiction. But the Gothic was only the symptom of the larger literary and cultural phenomenon

known as 'Romanticism' and in particular it is the primacy of notions of the imagination and the sublime associated with romantic writings that set the agenda for the development of science fiction.

Not only romantic poets like William Blake and Percy Bysshe Shelly, but also writer of Gothic novels like Horace Walpole and Mary Shelley, foregrounded the 'imagination' as the key artistic faculty. With 'imagination', we can read for our purpose, as 'the creative entering into the possibilities of the fantastic, the unknown and the other, than the everyday, together with the awe-inspiring splendor of the sublime'. This today is behind the sense of wonder science fiction- that establishes the artistic framework within which all science fiction writers' today work.

Frankenstein is a gothic novel very much in dialogue with Milton. Its epigraph, quoted from Milton's poem 'Did I request thee, maker, from clay to mould me man?' suggests the ways the novel functions as retelling of **Paradise Lost**.

Frankenstein's monster even identifies himself with Milton's Satan. The monster is brought into existence and then abandoned by his creator, who was so startled by the ugliness of his creation that he literally ran away and fell into a sort of amnesiac state. Left to his own devices, the monster teaches himself how to speak by overhearing the inhabitants of a remote house talking among themselves. He also manages, more far-fetchedly, to teach himself to read and amongst the first books he reads is Milton's **Paradise Lost**. 'I read it', he says, 'as a true history. It moved me to every feeling of wonder and awe'. (Mary Shelley- **Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus**- 1992:126)

The secret of **Frankenstein's** success is not hard to divine. It is in the detailed manifestation of the beautiful strangeness of the monster that the book strikes home; it is, in other words, the way its central character, who is also its novum, functions as an embodiment of alterative.

The strategies Shelley uses to this end are various. Most obviously, there is the sheer novelty of the creatures' origins, manufactured by a scientist. In a later preface, Shelley first added the suggestion that electricity may have played some part in animating the thing; in the novel as we may have it; there are no details as to how this feat was achieved. Along similar lines, the extreme fears are gothic attempts at sublimity, at articulating a state of being other than the ordinary. The polar landscapes of the novel's conclusions are the apotheosis of this.

The narrator encounters both Frankenstein and his ‘monstrous creation’ in an environment as far removed from the sort of environment we are used to , as it is possible to find on this surface of this planet. Frankenstein pursues his monster over the polar ice caps, a land that metaphorically reproduces the alienated strangeness of the novels central conceit. He almost apprehends him, but the elements intervene.

Shelley's novum, the alienated monster, articulates the way 'science' cuts itself off from the more organic processes of nature, and in turn functions as a symbol for a modern sense of alienated existence.

Darko Suvin argues that **Frankenstein** sets in motion a recurrent theme of science fiction, the idea that progress becomes indissoluble from catastrophe. (Suvin-1979:10) Though Shelley's novel has been in development of science fiction, it was not until the end of 19th century and the work of Verne and Wells that we start to see the actual growth of science fiction as a meaningful category in its own right. This is to say, as something more than the occasional single novel. And it is through Wells, rather than Verne that fiction centrally concerned with the encounter with difference is most thoroughly developed.

Jules Verne (1828- 1905) was particularly adept at stories of fantastic voyages. E.g. **Journey to the Center of the Earth**, (1863) follows its protagonists down the shaft of an extinct Icelandic volcano into the hollow space at the earth's core. Its narrative and descriptive evocations of the sublime give it an imaginative potency. In particular Verne's vision of enormous subterranean caverns, filled with primal oceans containing dinosaur monsters, functions as an effective symbol of the same unconscious arena represented by so many gothic cellars, dungeons and caves.

Other works by Verne are grounded in a particular, rationalist perspective on the virtues of technology. We see this in the much- filmed, **20,000 Leagues under the Sea** (1872). With its high-tech submarine, the 'Nautilus' or the more obvious science fiction **From the Earth to the Moon** (1865), in which the protagonists spaceship achieves escape velocity being fired from an enormous cannon.

All Verne's books are set in a version of his present day, and when he invented such science fiction, props a spaceship he was keen to work them from existing scientific principles.

H.G. Wells also wrote a story about lunar exploration; **The First Men in the Moon** (1901). In this novel, a scientist invents a metal that resists gravity and constructs a sphere of this material inside which, he and a friend are able to float off the face of the earth and eventually make their way to the moon.

H.G. Wells, according to the critic, Patrick Parrinder, is the pivotal figure in the evolution of science romance into modern science fiction (Parrinder-1980:10).

Wells mastered a range of 'representative themes' e.g. time-travel, alien invasion, biological mutation, the future-city, the anti-Utopia. But behind all this is a Wellsian fascination with encountering difference embodied in material form and a lucid sense of the symbolic possibilities of the imaginative novum.

Both Verne and Wells were writing deliberately popular fiction and working with the tradition of popular publishing of their day. So it is that Wells writing grew out of his speculative, mass-market journalism; whilst Verne struck up a lucrative deal with the publisher; who published his novels under the popularizing rubric of voyages extraordinary. In America, the popular market also dictated the beginnings of science fiction as a serious genre.

In particular, this is connected with the cheap magazine format known as 'pulp'. Advances in the manufacture of paper out of wood pulp in the 1880's fuelled a boom in cheap publishing and a wide range of magazines grew up, printed on a cheap thick paper that shreds easily and yellows quickly. These soon catered for specific markets i.e. westerns, detective fiction and romantic love-stories. The first pulp to specialize in what we might think of as science fiction was a Thrill Book in the year 1919.

A Luxembourg-born author, Hugo Gernsback worked hard to define the nascent field of science fiction: 'Not only is science fiction an idea of tremendous import, but it is to be an important factor in making the world a better place to live in, through educating the public to the possibilities of science and the influence of science in life....If every man, woman, boy and girl, could be induced to read science fiction right along, there would certainly be a great resulting benefit to the community...Science fiction would make people happier, giving them a broader understanding of the world, making them more tolerant'. (Gernsback quoted in James- 1994: 8- 9)

According to James, during the 1940's and 1950's American science fiction developed in maturity and complexity and above all in sheer quantity. (James- 1994:54)

The late 1930's and early 1940's is termed as the Golden Age in science fiction. Isaac Asimov, Clifford Simak, Jack Williamson, L.Sprague De Camp, Theodore Sturgeon, Robert Heinlein and

A.E. Von Vogt included the writing talents. Joseph Campbell, the editor of science fiction magazine, **Astounding** says, 'that groups of writings which is usually referred to as 'main-

stream literature' is actually a special subgroup of the field of science fiction- for science fiction deals with all places in the Universe, and all times in Eternity, so the literature of the here and now is truly a subset of science fiction' (Campbell, quoted in James 19 45:57).

Science fiction is about the encounter with difference. As its best, science fiction provides the supplest, and the most popular means of exploring questions of diversity and difference; it opens up new possibilities; it makes us think. Science fiction most effectively addresses the questions that have defined the age we live in: technology, gender, race, history etc. As a literature of ideas, where the emphasis is less on literary technique, science fiction has been able to trade in the concepts of philosophy, theory, history and politics in vivid and popular ways. More than this, there is a fundamental vigor and energy to science fabulation that is invigorating and energizing for the readers or viewers. Science fiction is the dominant mode of imaginative writing today, a body of work that encourages readers to take nothing for granted, to challenge all their assumptions, to think through how things may be different. It is time and again, accordingly, a revolutionary mode of writing.

The very notion that humans would walk on the moon, communicate across continents or fly in machines around the world, was at one time no more than the basis for a science fiction novel. When H G Wells wrote **The Time Machine**, did he perhaps harbor thoughts that this far-fetched mode of travel would one day become possible?

The well known writer Ray Bradbury, when asked to define science fiction, indicated there was a strong relationship to the thoughts of the writer as to his view of the future, a kind of prophetic mentality that guided the pen of the author.

Unlike fantasy, science fiction is usually based on things familiar but which are then stretched by the imagination into realms that are pure invention.

The typical science fiction novel is positioned somewhere between reality and fantasy, an example of literature that steps outside of reality but which preserves the impression the fictional account could become actuality in the future. Much of the science fiction produced in the past century is written from the standpoint of the author's own view that what is a fantastic story now, could be closer to reality for generations to come.

III CONCLUSION :

Some of the more common characteristics of science fiction literature are of humans with superhuman powers, space exploration that goes far beyond the capabilities of man and beings from outer space visiting our earthly realm. Common subjects are there in science

fiction, but they are subjects that are not too far removed from man's beliefs and hopes for the future. How many rational people on earth believe 'we are not alone' in the universe? It would be no surprise to find large numbers who believe there is life on other planets, some even believing we live in a parallel universe with people exactly like ourselves living light years from Earth.

Science fiction may not be reality, but it certainly has its basis in the real world in many instances. Space exploration is a fact of human life today, but science fiction takes that into dimensions that are impossible for humans to reach. There may be a similarity in landing a man on the moon and the exploits of the Starship Enterprise, but the gap between reality and imagination is very wide.

The characteristics of science fiction literature will differ from author to author, but there is understandably that constant connection to what we already know. Simply put, science fiction is science or knowledge fictionalized and stretched to a level that is outside of reality. In most cases, that link to the real world will be evident in the writings of most science fiction novelists.

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