

SCIENCE FICTION AND THE VICTORIAN AGE: A TRADITION OF SOCIALCRITIQUE AND SATIRE – A SELECT STUDY OF MAJOR SCIENCE FICTION WORKS OF THE VICTORIAN AGE

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Abstract

The Victorian age has long been recognized as an age that produced classic authors such as Charles Dickens, William Thackeray, the Bronte sisters and George Eliot. The many social changes and upheavals of the time fostered the growth of great literary works. It is also the age that gave birth to an important literary genre – science fiction. Though the term science fiction was not invented by then, critics and scholars alike agree that the genre was born during this age and it is also generally accepted that the first book of science fiction is Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein. Initially relegated to realm of fantasy, science fiction was not generally credited as being serious literature and ignored as pulp fiction for many years. However, this is no longer the case as new scholarship reveals that science fiction has more to offer than meets the eye. Writers like Darko Suvin refer to science fiction as a literature of “cognitive estrangement”, a literature that employs the technique of placing the reader in an unfamiliar or different world. Through this, the reader can view the real world from a fresh perspective and recognise its failings and shortcomings. Science fiction is often spoken of as a genre that critiques and satirises contemporary society. This tradition has started from its very inception in the Victorian age as the earliest writers of the genre created a new way of writing literature in order to comprehensively capture the ethos of the period and the social changes that occur along with the rapid advancements in science and technology.

Keywords: Victorian age, science fiction, social critique, satire, cognitive estrangement, imperialism, colonization.

Science fiction, for a long time, had been relegated to the realm of fantasy and pulp genre and not considered ‘serious literature’ or ‘high literature’. Its growth in popularity along with pulp magazines during the forties and fifties gave rise to a lot of bad science fiction which did not help the cause of the genre. Recent studies and scholarship have,

however, begun to study the genre closely and revealed that, in its best, has more to offer than meets the eye. Science Fiction is nowadays regarded more seriously as writers and critics have come to recognise its value, especially in terms of social commentary and satire. Formerly considered fantastical and unrealistic, Science Fiction is now regarded as accurate portrayals of contemporary society and the problems besetting it. The relevance and importance of science fiction is best expressed by noted science fiction writer and critic, Brian Aldiss, who made the famous statement that,

...we are living in a SF scenario. A collapsing environment, a hyper-connected world, suicide bombers, perpetual surveillance, the discovery of other solar systems, children drugged with behaviour controllers -- its all coming true at last. In such a climate, it is the conventionally literary that is threatened, and science fiction comes into its own as the most hardcore realism. (qtd. in Appleyard 1)

Science fiction defined as “hardcore realism” emphasises the seriousness and significance of the genre. It also exposes the general erroneous belief that science fiction is mere fantasy and escapist. A closer study of science fiction shows their acute awareness of the social conditions, thoughts and philosophies of their respective times and the critique of these through satire. Far from being escapists, science fiction has been consistently that genre of fiction that has, in its capacity, represented social truth even in times of persecution. For example, during the Cold War tension of the 1950s where authors in America with left-leaning ideas were persecuted and censored, science fiction served as a popular platform for critiquing American capitalism. Frederik Pohl in *Political Science Fiction* states that science fiction writers can “say things in hint and metaphor that the writer dares not say in the clear” (10). He also goes on to state that it is “the only truly free speech left in America” (12). Another example is the popular *The Handmaid’s Tale* by Margaret Atwood which was written in reaction to patriarchal conditions that have long prevailed in America and the growing power of its religious right wing under the Reagan administration of the 1980s. Atwood focuses on women and sexuality as the principal targets of both the fictional and real life regimes. Science Fiction, at its best, is always found to be deeply concerned with contemporary society and endeavours to truthfully expose the ailments that beset it. This has been so since the very start of the genre during the Victorian age.

Though considered a more modern genre of writing, the roots of the genre can be traced back to the Victorian Age where Mary Shelley, Jules Verne, HG Wells and others began writing stories that were distinct from any other literature prevalent during the period. Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, though first published in 1818, gained great popularity during the Victorian Age as it captured the energies, changes and apprehensions of the time. The Victorian age was a period of great technological, political and socio-economic changes which inevitably made the age a volatile one. The hegemony of the aristocracy was being challenged by a new middle class that was rapidly growing and prospering from the

innovations in science and changes in education and economic laws. Values and beliefs were also undergoing a sea change as thinkers such as Jeremy Bentham, James Mills and John Stuart Mills were changing the philosophical mindset of the people with their “Philosophic Radicalism”, a movement based on a scientific approach to social changes and beliefs. These thinkers questioned the hierarchies and long-established institutions of authority within the society and this spirit of questioning carried over even to the Church which has had the strongest hold upon the public psyche for the longest time. Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of the Species*, published in 1859, created much controversy and the ensuing debates and confrontations between intellectuals and clergymen brought about by this revolutionary book gradually removed the domination of the clergy from many spheres of life especially from scientific establishments. The Industrial Revolution brought forth many changes in the make-up of the society as it ushered a rapid migration of people from rural to urban areas searching for a better life. Along with this migration came a set of new problems and challenges within the society. As H. Bruce Franklin puts it,

By the end of the 18th century and the opening of the 19th, industrial capitalism was beginning its conquest of the world...Under industrial capitalism, vast numbers of people were soon spending their lives working for a handful of capitalists who owned everything the people produced, including the factories, coal mines, railroads, and ships. Not only were the workers thus alienated from the means of production and their own products, but they also found themselves increasingly alienated from nature, from each other, and from their own essence as creative beings (n.p.).

All these changes, complications and challenges fostered the growth of great literary works. The novel rose rapidly in popularity, especially the social novel, as it captured the social, political and economic upheaval of the time which was brought about by industrialisation and urbanisation and it also reflected the changing ideologies of the new educated class. Charles Dickens, William Thackeray, the Bronte sisters, George Eliot and other such giants of English fiction belonged to this period. It is also generally accepted by scholars and critics that this is the period where the genre of science fiction was born. The conditions of the period were such that the creation of science fiction seemed inevitable. As Franklin adds:

From this matrix emerged what Brian Aldiss has so aptly labeled "the first great myth of the industrial age" in the form of a novel that many now accept as the progenitor of modern science fiction: Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, or, *The Modern Prometheus* (1818). Then, less than a decade after *Frankenstein*, Shelley created one of the first science fiction visions of the end of the world; the title character of her *The Last Man* (1826) wanders alone over a dead planet, sampling the useless achievements of all human society (ibid).

Herbert Sussman in his review of Darko Suvin's book, *Victorian Science Fiction in the UK: The Discourse of Knowledge and of Power*, writes,

The field of Victorian literature, once securely defined in Arnoldian fashion as the single "great tradition" at whose center are Tennyson and Browning, Dickens and Eliot, Carlyle and Ruskin, has like so much in our collective past become destabilized, decentered to reveal instead a multiplicity of traditions and genres--of literature written for the working class and children, of non-realist forms such as nonsense and fantasy, even of literature written by females for female readers (324).

So, besides the traditional novelists that had become synonymous with the period, there were also other equally important authors such as Mary Shelley and H.G. Wells. These were the very first science fiction authors though the term science fiction had not yet been coined at this time.

In the canon of the science fiction genre, there are none more well-known or widely read than *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley, *Voyages Extraordinaire* series of novels by Jules Verne and the *War of the Worlds* by H.G. Wells. *Frankenstein*, as mentioned earlier, is considered by most to be the very first Science Fiction book. Aping the style of the popular Gothic tales at the time, the novel used elements of shock and horror to narrate its tale. The main difference of this novel from other Gothic tales was that it depended less on magic and paranormal elements for its plot but rather, used prevailing scientific ideas to bring the story to life and thus giving it a sense of possibility and realism. In the novel, the protagonist Victor Frankenstein is a chemist who creates a monster in his laboratory. Shelley's critique of Romanticism and Enlightenment and the freedom from all constraints that they profess is embodied by the main character. Victor Frankenstein becomes obsessed with his work and ambition to create life. In his ambition to 'play God', he does not hesitate to consider the ramifications of his actions. Driven only by his desire, he is blind to the many complications that his work will bring forth. Besides the practical complications, there are also moral questions to his actions that he completely ignores. Shelley uses Victor to satirise the lack of foresight, moral judgement and sense of responsibility by the learned people of her age. She sees society hurtling recklessly forward as new technological advancements captured the imagination of the 18th century society as the possibilities of science seemed limitless. The dire consequences of such recklessness are represented by the tragedies that follow Victor Frankenstein's life as his monster haunts his life till the very end. Besides being a tale of caution on the misplaced faith that people had in the possibilities of what science can achieve, the story can also be considered to be a critique of human nature and the destructive impulses inherent within man. As author and critic, Oliver Teale, states,

...one reason that *Frankenstein* remains such a relevant novel 200 years after its publication is that it encourages us to think about where 'monsters' come from. And, like Mary Shelley's creation, such people are still people, or

‘Beings’. This is the unpalatable but unavoidable truth of Frankenstein as it is of the works of Dostoevsky: as with the best and subtlest Gothic fiction we are forced to confront the ‘monster’ not as some mysterious other but as a force lying latent within us, too. (n.p.)

From the very first Science Fiction novel, the genre can be seen to be more than just a telling of fantastical tales that are different from everyday experience. Darko Suvin, in his book, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, argues that science fiction is a literature of “cognitive estrangement”, a literature that employs the technique of placing the reader in an unfamiliar or different world. Through this, the reader can view the real world from a fresh perspective and recognise its failings and shortcomings. James Gunn echoes this view by characterising science fiction as a literature set in worlds different from our own – and different in ways that invite the reader to “interrogate these differences,” to ask “hard questions” (5) about them in terms of what they can tell us about our own world.

Verne’s *Voyages Extraordinaire* series of novels instantly established him as a major writer in France and most of Europe and had a wide influence on the literary avant-garde and on surrealism. However, poor translations of his works hampered his reputation in the English speaking world and, for a long time, he was wrongly regarded as a writer of children’s books in these places. But Verne was a thorough researcher for his novels. The accuracy with which he described his machines and also his ability in anticipating new developments to come in the field of technology, made many to hail him as a genius and a visionary by many. The *Voyages Extraordinaire* tales are described as a document about a changing world and the “new possibilities—social, scientific, or political—opened up by progress” (5). In his essay, “Jules Verne: Negotiating Change in the Nineteenth Century”, Timothy Unwin writes that

With its shift to technology, travel, and the international arena, the world that Jules Verne portrays is immediately distinct from that of most "canonical" nineteenth-century novelist... While Baudelaire, Flaubert, Hugo and others develop a complex poetic concept of travel and its artistic implications, however, Verne concentrates above all on its practicalities, focusing on the technical details of locomotion, communication, and what we nowadays call "lifestyle." From the submarine to the ocean liner, the train to the motor car, the balloon to the airplane, the phonograph to the telephone, the photograph to the moving image, virtually no aspect of contemporary technological experiment or development remains unmentioned or untouched in his writings (5).

In an age where rapid colonisation was changing the geo-political map of the world and tremendous advances in travel technology were shrinking the globe, Verne’s stories were reinventing the art of fiction to include a larger world view:

...he also opens his reader's eyes to the political dimensions of exploration and colonization, since he takes a strong interest in the issue of nationalities, both

in terms of particular national characteristics (the British and the Americans are subjected to especially lively characterization in his novels) and in terms of national uprisings and the oppression of minorities. Nemo, among many other characters in Verne's work, is famously the champion of an oppressed group (6).

Besides being visionary in terms of scientific advancements, Verne was also ahead of his times in terms of trying to impart as much cultural representation to his work. His characters are drawn from various ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Besides this, *20,000 Leagues under the Sea* has been argued by critics such as Margaret Dabble as being a pioneer of the ecological movement and also a major influence on the avant-garde movement. All these factors made Verne one of the most important writers of all time and one of the pioneers of the science fiction genre.

War of the Worlds by Wells is a book recognised by most fiction readers. It is one of the earliest science fiction stories and a major influence on the growth and development of the genre. It is also one of the very first to deal with the theme of invasion from outer space. In the story, Martians come to earth to colonise it. An immersive story with vivid descriptions of extra-terrestrials, futuristic ships and weapons and furious battles the Martians and earth's armies, *War of the Worlds* is a classic of genre. It is also one of the first stories to speak against imperialism and colonisation. The novel was published during the time when European countries, especially Britain, have colonised almost the entire world. Wells makes it clear that this novel is satire on the evils of imperialism and colonisation. Entire races of people and species of animals were being wiped out by the conquering colonizers whose superior technology was too much for any indigenous resistance.

[B]efore we judge of [the Martians] too harshly, we must remember what ruthless and utter destruction our own species has wrought, not only upon animals, such as the vanished bison and the dodo, but upon its own inferior races. The Tasmanians, in spite of their human likeness, were entirely swept out of existence in a war of extermination waged by European immigrants, in the space of fifty years. Are we such apostles of mercy as to complain if the Martians warred in the same spirit?(4; I.1)

The sense of helplessness, fear and anxiety felt by the humans as the invading Martians with superior technology run through earth's meagre defences are meant to echo the plight of indigenous people under the invading colonizers. Wells wanted the reading public to feel and empathize with those whom their nation controls. As the narrator flees and hides from the conquering Martians, he contemplates upon what has transpired and reaches an epiphany.

I, who talked with God, crept out of the house like a rat leaving its hiding place – a creature scarcely larger, an inferior animal, a thing that for any passing whim of our masters might be hunted and killed. Perhaps they also prayed confidently to God. Surely, if we have learned nothing else, this war

has taught us pity – pity for those witless souls that suffer our dominion. (89; II.7)

Victorian vanity vanishes as the narrator compares humankind to no more than creatures that they have deemed inferior; who did not “talked with God”, “witless souls that suffer our dominion.” This “pity” he speaks of can also be extended to the “witless souls” of colonised countries that suffer imperialistic “dominion”. Though popularly remembered for its sensational aspects, Wells’ *War of the Worlds* is and was always meant to be an allegory on war, Victorian morality and imperialism.

The War of the Worlds comments on then contemporary phenomenon of colonialism. Crucial here is Wells’s understanding that an invasion by a technologically superior alien power would suddenly place colonial powers such as Great Britain in the same position as which those powers have placed Tasmania, Africa, and other colonized regions of the globe...Still, the sweeping implication of this invasion produce striking new perspectives that allow the book to establish a substantial cognitive distance from reality, while at the same time commenting on that reality in a profound way (Thomas 185).

The success of *Frankenstein* and *War of the Worlds* went a long way in establishing the birth of a new genre of literature and also providing this new genre with tradition that, in its best form, seeks to critique and satirise contemporary society. It comprehensively takes into account, not historical, sociological and economic trends but also factors in important technological innovations that have huge implications on society. In his comparative essay, ‘The Martians Are Coming! War, Peace, Love, and Scientific Progress in H.G. Wells’s *The War of the Worlds* and Kurd LaBwitz’s *Auf Zwei Planeten*’, Ingo Cornils writes:

Inventing an “aesthetics of the future” by writing about science and technology, ethics and morals, the fate of both the individual and the human race, love and duty, culture and nature, they set the ground rules for one of the most popular genres of the twentieth century: science fiction. Their tales have encouraged a mode of thinking that fuels our present endeavors in space, and they suggest solutions to problems that still beset us on earth: an ecology in danger, rampant nationalism, and social injustice. (26)

The Victorian Age will always be remembered as an important age in terms of human history. The modern world, as we know it today, owes much to the great technological, political and socio-economic changes of the period. It is also the age that gave birth to a new genre of literature, science fiction. Writers like Shelley, Verne and Wells laid the foundations for this new genre that captured the imagination of a rapidly changing society fuelled by new inventions and discoveries, inspired by the scientific temper of the age. Of the many characteristics of this new genre, social commentary and critique of society was established from its formative period. The early writers had to find a new way of writing stories that would comprehensively capture the ethos of the period and speculate on the

dangers of present courses in a manner that would captivate and shock the readers. Science fiction has grown in popularity and prestige over the years as many writers are looking to the genre as a tool to express their thoughts and ideas. The themes, subject matter and style have grown exponentially as the genre itself has expanded into many sub-genres, but the tradition of social critique and satire remains.

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