

Science Fiction QUARTERLY

ALL
STORIES
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Limitations of Science Fiction

"SCIENCE FICTION may stimulate our imaginations by postulating developments in the future, but it can add nothing to our knowledge or understanding of human nature, and it is with the latter that all thinking men are chiefly concerned." So ends an article in the *London Times Literary Supplement*, Friday September 17, 1954, page xlii. As is to be expected, there have already been some sharp dissents by various science-fictionists, and doubtless more are to be expected. However, none of the replies that I have seen so far have attempted an appraisal of the situation, being content merely to say "Tain't so" somewhat shrilly and suggest that the un-named author of the article from which this quotation was taken is more to be pitied than censured.

The issue raises a number of rather interesting questions, however. (1) Why the defensive attitude on the part of science-fictionists, generally? (2) Should science fiction be considered as a special category of fiction? (3) Is the estimate given above valid in part, or as a whole, and if in part, where is it sound?

I do not pretend to know the answers to any degree of finality, but offer the following suggestions.

(1) Most science-fictionists come to this form of fiction during their early teens, before their standards of literary judgment are matured to any large extent. A new and wonderful world is opened up to them through the sweep and escape-potential and wish-fulfilling quality of this type of fiction. Science fiction becomes an object of infatuation, and one's critical faculties are hardly at their height under such conditions. With the passing of time, infatuation sometimes gives way to more or less permanent affection, wherein a certain amount of fault can be found with the object but the emotional coloring remains.

Many science fictionists have had to cope with parents' disapproval of this type of reading matter, partly because (up to very recently) it was mostly obtainable only in pulp magazines—still not very respectable in the adult world, and particularly in the pedagogical sections of it—and partly because of the lurid and unconventional nature of a great deal of it. A hundred years ago, the puritanical frown upon "novel reading" of any kind was very much with us; when I was going to school, "dime novels" were not considered proper reading

matter and the phrase included pulp fiction of any variety. (One could still find copies of paperbound Nick Carter, Frank Merriwell, and Horatio Alger novels in second hand stores.) And parents were—and still are—often embarrassed to find the youngsters ardent fans of reading matter they, their neighbors and friends consider somewhat queer.

As a result, many science fictionists had to justify their choice of reading matter to the extent of persuading their elders that it wasn't what it appeared to be from the gaudy covers on the old *Amazing Stories*, *Wonder Stories*, *Astounding Stories of Super-Science*, etc., but that it was really highgrade material—educational, etc. In many cases, the young fan had to get his science fiction homework done surreptitiously, and there was always a certain amount of guilt larded in with the pleasure.

Necessity for more or less constant justification, and guilt-feeling, can set up a pretty neat defensive pattern, and once that type of pattern is established, the mechanism often continues to operate long after the initial necessity for it has passed. I don't say that this accounts for all the tender and touchy skins amongst science fictionists when their reading matter is criticized, but it can certainly account for a great deal of it. All this could be dismissed with a shrug once any explanation is accepted, were it not for one thing; the defense mechanism makes it impossible for many science fictionists to examine science fiction with the degree of objectivity needed to make a meaningful evaluation of their considerable data on the subject.

(2) Science fiction, per se, has been labelled as a specialized branch of literature only recently, considering the span of recorded Western Literature—for only about thirty years. It is an artificial category, created for commercial purposes by Hugo Gernsback—created with love, let us add, but it would not have lasted long without a large supply of cash customers.

As a result, instead of the occasional works of imagination, satire, philosophy, etc., (tabbed "science fiction" by fans, after the event) which had been appearing throughout the course of centuries, there came a steady outpouring of works fitting into the various editorial and publishers requirements for this specialized brand of popular magazine fare. By and large the product has not been much worse than the

usual run of popular (pulp) fiction throughout the past thirty years—though at the same time, it hasn't been as greatly superior to the general run of adventure fiction as aficionados make it out to have been. Without the special pleading of the faithful—of all varieties of taste and temperament—only a small fraction of the output that has survived (remained available and in consumption, that is) up to 1955 would be with us at all.

SINCE THE cult of science-fiction-as-literature has attracted a number of influential persons (influential in the sense that they are able to promote it through publishing anthologies, etc.) quite a large list of solid literary works—recognized as such, that is, before Gernsback—have been captured by aficionados and are exultantly displayed as early examples of the art. The tree of ancestor worship produces weird fruit, and some of the weirdest are such authors as Plato, Lucian, Sir Thomas More, Rabelais (for still others, see Derleth's "Beyond Time & Space") packaged in the science fiction basket. This is understandable; it would be difficult to make a case for the "eternal" value of science fiction were the attorneys for the case limited to the magazine—and more recently, the book—output of the past thirty years. (Gernsback reprinted many of H. G. Wells' short stories, and a few of his romances and socio-philosophical novels as examples of the type of fiction meant. Unfortunately, enthusiasm could not by itself produce the craftsmanship and insight into human behavior that Wells had before he started writing this type of story.)

(3) The author of the *Times* article has rigged the question somewhat by giving a very restrictive definition of science fiction, and it is difficult to dispute such matters since no science fictionist to date has come forth with a definition acceptable to all the others. However, I think we can find a flaw in the (assumed) definition given here—that science fiction is necessarily concerned with inventions (gadgets) and adventure, almost to the exclusion of every other consideration to be found in general literature. Certainly a high percentage of examples can be pointed to, but as *Sporting Life* would say, "It ain't necessarily so."

Let's see if we can find a few general elements in science fiction which seasoned followers would agree do belong in a general definition. (I confess right now to rigging myself. It follows from this that anyone who didn't accept these elements is obviously not a "seasoned follower of science fiction.")

First of all, since this is *fiction* we're talking about, science fiction must include the basic elements of any other type of fiction. Secondly, since our subject is *science* fiction, then a consideration of the relationship between some aspects or categories of "science" and human society must

form a core of the story. This, as we know, is extremely variable. The relationship may include a given "social order" or aspects thereof; it may be concentrated only on the individual or individuals taking the larger social order for granted; it may explore aspects of human nature by dealing with their presence or absence in mythical "non-humans," and so on. Third, the "science" element cannot be merely a depiction of what is known, or what exists here and now; speculation in regard to the "science"—the "what if such-and-such were different"—must come in. (I have tried to phrase this in such a way so that a novel like "Arrowsmith," even if written today by a science fiction author for a science fiction market, could not qualify. On the other hand, I'm afraid this must include a great deal of work by Ray Bradbury which—because I consider it bad despite Ray's remarkable craftsmanship—I'd like to exclude. Pseudo-science, however we may look at it, does represent a type of relationship between society and the real thing; and regardless of whether Bradbury's pictures are caricatures, they do present real attitudes. The stories would not be *essentially* different if the technical absurdities had not been perpetrated.

CAN SCIENCE FICTION add anything to our knowledge and understanding of human nature? We can only answer in reference to specific *works* of science fiction, rather than in reference to the abstraction. And to answer in the affirmative one need point only to one example, one story which the author intended as science fiction. Mr. Tyler to the contrary—see the February *Science Fiction Quarterly*, "Perfection is No Trifle"—we cannot take such a novel as Huxley's "Brave New World" as science fiction, however tempting. All the evidence indicates that Huxley had no such intentions. I think we have an example close at hand: "They'd Rather Be Right," by Mark Clifton and Frank Riley. (*Astounding Science Fiction*, August-November 1954.) It is too soon to assess the extent to which this story fulfills the requirement, but I think it can qualify.

I do not mean by this that "They'd Rather Be Right" is a "great novel," nor is the requirement fulfilled only by masterworks of literature. Many works of fiction, (significant in this regard) fall short of the highest rank. Some are lesser works of authors who are best known for a single or a few superior achievements. (Melville, for example, is listed among the greats for "Moby Dick;" but some of his lesser novels are considered worth knowing, too.) Many fine works have been produced by authors who nonetheless did not produce a single work of the highest rank.

But should science fiction be considered as a limited field of expression? It is not so by definition, except to the extent that all fiction is to be considered limited.

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LIMITATIONS OF SCIENCE FICTION

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I suspect that the reason for this attitude lies in assumptions drawn from a close look at the examples to hand in the past quarter-century. Are there grounds for such an assumption within the general practice of science-fiction writing?

I think there is at least one: many, if not most, science fiction writers are either young men, or men who have *started out in writing* for the science fiction market. Without considering the limitations imposed by the requirements of popular fiction, there are two elements in the making of significant fiction (fiction which adds to our knowledge or understanding of human nature) which we must consider here. One is skill in writing; the other is a sizeable fund of knowledge and understanding of human nature (human behaviour would be a better term) on the part of the writer. The one requires talent and practice; the other requires a great deal of first-hand and vicarious experience in living and knowing human beings. This is obtained partly through a wide range of human contact and first-hand experience, and partly through study. The first-hand experience will assist in achieving verisimilitude in portraying fictional characters, but this alone will not necessarily give the author the necessary breadth of understanding to interpret and explore human behaviour in significant writing. Study of history, philosophy,

science, etc., must be added to a wide range of first-hand experience before the author has anything to "say."

Outside of the occasional "natural genius" no writer in his teens, or twenties, etc., with a background of school, plus intense reading of science fiction magazines, and perhaps a splurge of fan activity, has anything to say. (I'm putting this dogmatically in order to stress the point, and am ready to qualify that seemingly absolute "*no writer*" once the general point is established.)

To sum it up, while the *Times* writer may have overstated the case, I think he is correct in a way. Science fiction hasn't added very much to our knowledge or understanding of human nature, and its general practice is such that few significant works are likely to come from the field. It isn't the "literature of the future" any more than jazz is the "music of the future;" the limitations in practice are a part of the field.

But true "masterworks" have usually been created by men who burst the limitations of the field in which they were working; there's no reason why this could not, positively could not happen in science fiction.

All of this should not, for an instant, mar our enjoyment of a rousing good story. RWL

