The Genre of Science Fiction

Types of Science Fiction

I used to believe that science fiction was a form of proto-literature, like the Breton lays from which the great cycles of Arthurian romance were supposed to have emerged; and that when the stock of gadgetry was complete, some genius would take the whole imaginary world, and turn it into literature. But I was wrong. Science fiction is a prototype, not of science literature but of science fact; and the best way to improve it is to leave the literary elements out.¹

The writer of the above quotation believes that the reason for poverty of literary quality in science fiction is that we simply do not know what kind of character would operate against particular backdrops or in what kind of social system he would operate. He goes on to say that science fiction is usually only read for the following purposes: (1) it is read basically for the gadgets in it, which are weird, intricate and delightful, and may actually constitute whole, imaginary societies, (2) it is read as one might read a vast Army and Navy stores catalogue full of complicated technological novelties, and (3) it is read as a set of “prepackaged imminent futures.” With this reading intent, the trouble with science fiction is that stories have to be attached.²

This point of view about science fiction brings up questions such as: Is science fiction story? Is it good story? Should it be story? There are levels of quality in science fiction just as there are in all types of literature, and authors will continue to hand out information in pseudo-story form. Perhaps it would be more useful to look at the types of science fiction in print and then determine the characteristics of this body of printed matter in relation to the characteristics of story.

In discussing adult fiction, Derleth states that: “Fundamentally, seven out of every ten science fiction stories are only orthodox adventure tales with the trappings of interplanetary travel.”³

He goes on to say that this particular type of science fiction relates to the genre as the confession story does in the genre of romantic fiction. The type of science fiction that commands the respect of the literate reader is concerned with good story and utilizes some phase of science.⁴

Moore has categorized adult science fiction into four groups: space opera, literary extrapolation, and humanoid relations. His description of each group implies levels or quality of story.

Space opera constitutes adventure stories. It is exciting, the characters are flat, scientific gadgetry is created to fit the plot of the story rather than to adapt established engineering principles, it is set in a future so

²Loc. cit.
⁴Ibid., pp. 120-21.
remote as to be of little personal interest to the reader, it does not contain valuable scientific data, and it has little literary merit.

The literary group subordinates science to theme or mood rather than plot. The futuristic machines may be shadowy and magical or clearly described, but they are never important in themselves. They are only used as manifestations of human motives and problems.

Extrapolation is careful to use gadgetry based on sound scientific principles. Extrapolating is done from the known to the unknown along a logical curve.

The humanoid relations group of science fiction is based on extended assumptions in anthropology. This group usually constitutes what life would be like on other planets.5

Children’s books of science fiction also seem to fall into these four groups. A greater number of the books fit into the groups of space opera and extrapolation, or are a combination of these two groups.

A Definition

Defining science fiction is difficult because, as already indicated by the types of science fiction, there is a broad area of content covered in the genre. The content ranges from the almost realistic to extreme fancy. Heinlein’s solution to the breadth of science fiction is to call the whole field “speculative fiction”—fiction about things that have not happened—and he would limit the name science fiction to a sub-class. Other sub-classes he mentions are: undisguised fantasy (the Oz books), pseudo-scientific fantasy (Bradbury’s Martian stories), sociological speculation (H. G. Wells’ World Set Free), and adventure stories with exotic and nonexistent locale (Flash Gordon).6

Heinlein defines science fiction as:

... speculative fictions in which the author takes as his first postulate the real world as we know it, including all established facts and natural laws. The result can be extremely fantastic in content, but it is not fantasy; it is legitimate—and often very tightly reasoned—speculation about the possibilities of the real world.7

Heinlein’s definition is not clear because he does not define his use of the terms fantastic and fantasy. His definition implies that science fiction is grounded in reality, it contains imaginary elements, and that writers consciously order this fiction. The grounding in reality with imaginary elements is fancy or it can be said the story is fanciful. Perhaps he is using the term fantastic to mean fanciful. Fantastic and fantastic, in a literary sense, mean all elements of the story are outside the natural order. Fanciful and fanciful mean that some of the elements are within the natural order.

The definition of science fiction becomes even more clouded when the characters, events, or settings are analyzed. While some of the characters in science fiction are closer to a natural or realistic character, others are preternatural and some are almost supernatural. This makes the story border on the fantastic. However, the characters, events, or settings never completely cross over the border of reality and because of this they remain fanciful. There may be a fine line or an overlapping between the terms fancy and fanciful, and fantasy and fantastic when applied to science fiction. Perhaps we need a new term to define

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7 Ibid., p. 369.
adequately science fiction as a literary statement.

Other concepts of science fiction also fail to shed light on the dilemma.

John W. Campbell, Jr., editor of Astounding Science Fiction, tells us that "The interest in science fiction stories is not economic, not romantic, but technical-philosophical... the hopes and dreams and fears (for some dreams are nightmares!) of a technically based society."

Isaac Asimov, author of some 75 science fiction books, informs us that "science fiction is that branch of literature which deals with a fictitious society, differing from our own chiefly in the nature and extent of its technological development."

Gerald Heard, serious writer on social philosophy but author, also, of many titles of science fiction and mystery, almost frightens us with his claim that "science-fiction is the prophetic—a better term, the apocalyptic—literature of our particular and culminating epoch of crisis."

There are many definitions but each stresses science fiction—as the term understood by the writing craft—to be (a) prophetic, (b) descriptive of the social impacts of science, (c) set in a novel, imaginative, possible fantastic, situation.8

From the previous definitions it is obvious that science fiction involves what is already known about the world and speculation and imagination of what could be. Authors of science fiction take knowledge, phenomena, and understandings of the present, and imaginatively reveal the future or past. It can be said that they are speculating as to what could be or has been. Perhaps these authors are doing more than this. Are they attempting to penetrate the future or the past? Are they attempting to influence the future by planting the seed now? No matter what the intent, science fiction is unique in that it has taken present wisdom and knowledge and sometimes projected it to a point of almost incomprehensibility. This projection is set a future or a past that may not be realized for generations or never realized at all. Very simply, one might define science fiction as, that kind of literature that is based on what is known and taken to the realm of the unknown.

Science Fiction as Story

Author's Intent

The intent of the author in writing story is non-discourse. In this area science fiction covers a wide range—from almost discourse to a high level of non-discourse. There are those authors who adequately treat the story as "thought about feeling." The reader is aware of the characters' struggles in the situations in which they are placed, or which they have brought about. The reader feels the existence of a fanciful event, situation, or time and feels with the characters (who are probably realistic in this setting) as they think, feel, and behave in what is, to us, the unknown. In story where the characters are fanciful, the reader experiences some of the feelings of these characters' internal existence in their realistic or fanciful situations. Science fiction that is good story is at a high level of non-discourse. It seems to be philosophical in nature in that it reveals man's struggle (through the knowledge of science known and projected) to understand and to control his world, to find his place in some society, or societies, at some point in time.

There is also the science fiction that is just a degree away from a discursive intent. It does not have the "feel" of story. It is fiction only in that the plot centers around, or sometimes just hints at, a world that

never was. This kind of science fiction does nothing more than give an account or a detailed description of the actions of characters using scientific gadgetry. In some of these books, the author has stated that his purpose for writing was to give accurate information to children about already known scientific technology. These authors also speculate, but not too far, how this technology can be used with what is not known. The plot and characters in these books are contrived to fit into the information the author presents. There is very little, and more often no element of the imaginative or fanciful in character, situation, time, and so forth. Science fiction of this type is closer to informational literature than it is to story. The science fiction for younger children is more of this type. Reason tells us that this type is preferable because young children are still attempting to sort out their real world. It would be better to give them authentic informational books rather than information disguised as story.

There is another type of "discursive science fiction" that is closely aligned to the previous information oriented "story." Here, the author uses fanciful scientific gadgetry and sometimes fanciful characters to tell his tale. However, the discursive style is the same. The author merely gives an account of flat characters using scientific gadgetry in some place at some point in time. Many of the space travel books can be characterized as either of these two types, "discursive, realistic science fiction" or "discursive, fanciful science fiction."

Character

In science fiction books where scientific technology (gadgets, robots, computers, principles, theories) and melodramatic events are emphasized, character tends to be subordinate to plot and setting. The characters are flat or static and sometimes stereotyped. The technology or the event, in a way, becomes the dynamic, changing character. The reader in this type of fiction is engrossed and overwhelmed by the working of the technology or event, and the way in which each takes over the story. Technology and events make things happen; they change things, but they do not change people in these stories. Or people do not change because of them. The characters are absorbed into the functioning of the technology or the happening in the event. Character is merely the manipulator, creator, or recipient of some dynamic, scientific power. Since it is through this technology or event that the plot evolves and the character is seen, the technology or event becomes the element of source upon which conflict and tension of the story are built. Thus, they assume the role of character. Although many of the technological and event oriented books contain many fine elements of story and craftsmanship, there seems to be a depth of feeling lost by the reader. In other words, the technology or event cannot replace the human being as a thinking, but more important, as a feeling, struggling character.

The area of science fiction also contains some serial books and they range in quality as do any of the serials in all of children's literature. The characters in these serials are delightful, humorous, realistic, and fanciful. They grow and change to some extent within one story, but they are static in that they remain the same throughout the series; only the plot changes. The serials contain a combination of the types of science fiction already discussed.

Science fiction that is philosophical in nature contains character that is dynamic. Although scientific technology and events assume a significant part of the story development in this type of science fiction, they do not overshadow character. It is because of character that technology and
event are necessary. In this type of science fiction there is a good balance of major and minor characters, and therefore, there is a good balance of equilibrium and change. The characters are natural to the contrived setting and, to some degree, to the point in time. A difficulty that arises is that science fiction deals with the unknown at some point in time. It is most difficult to project how realistic characters will behave at a time other than the present. It is especially difficult to envision how scientific technology will eventually affect the behavior of man. All the author can really do is cause the character to behave in the only way the author knows, the present. When time in the story involves a remote future or remote past or when an imagined fanciful setting is used, the reader has to constantly ask himself, “Would the character behave in this way? Will or did man think and feel the same way as he now does about his world?”

Character development in good science fiction has the same quality as character development in any good story for children. The characters make story. The first concern of any author or reader is good story. What the story is about, whether it is science, history, and so forth, is only a factor that interests the author and reader.

Narrative

The narrative of science fiction may differ from other genres in that there is sometimes a need for explaining in detail the particular scientific concept or the functioning of scientific technology involved. The amount of detail given varies in all types of science fiction. However, one finds that less detailed explanations are given when the story revolves around character. It also seems that as the story increases in detailed explanations it moves nearer to discourse.

Plot, Time, and Setting

The uniqueness of plot in science fiction centers around the author’s imagination in relation to time, setting, and scientific technology. Through scientific means characters are transported to a future or past point in time, or they explore the unknown within the confines of the present. Time, depending on plot and development of character, is treated as in other fiction, chronologically, psychologically, and fancifully. In science fiction, however, time may have another dimension—that of transporting characters from the present to a remote past or future. This is usually done instantaneously. There is no feel of time on the part of the reader or no realization of time passing by the characters in the story. This dimension of time can be termed unrealized time or transforming time as it changes drastically the point in time but does not exist in itself.

Through scientific means characters are also transported to a setting that has not yet been explored. In many instances the settings in science fiction are constructed and shifting. Realistic settings usually occur at the beginning and end of the story. As with the scientific technology and events mentioned before, setting sometimes becomes so important in science fiction that it almost becomes character.

The plot lines in science fiction are usually very simple in a story that deals with almost incomprehensible scientific concepts that effect time, setting, or character.

Structure

The overall structure or form of science fiction is the balance of reality with the fanciful, or the balance between the known and the unknown. This is accomplished by using enough aspects of reality through character, event, time, or setting to secure equilibrium and creating fanciful character,
event, time, or setting to cause tension. Without some aspect of reality, science fiction would be too much to the reader to comprehend. It would not be believable. The handling of this tension and equilibrium through reality and imagination is what gives science fiction its unique structure.

An attempt has been made to show how the various characteristics of science fiction cause it to be more like story or less like story. From some of these characteristics, the genre of science fiction begins to emerge. However, in order to see the genre more clearly, science fiction has to be viewed as a whole. Its wholeness lies in its definition. Its genre lies in part of that definition—from the known to the unknown. Dealing with science in a fictionalized form does not make science fiction a unique part of literature, but using science and moving into unlimited fictionalized possibilities of what could be gives a uniqueness to science fiction.

Bibliography