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Embracing Science Fiction in School Curriculum

On a cold starry night in 1816, young Mary Shelley started a story that would change the world. In *Frankenstein*, Shelley told a tale that went beyond the modest task of a ghost story. In it, her hero Dr. Frankenstein created a living being from the dead flesh of corpses. Horrified by the monster, the doctor fled, abandoning his child and forsaking his creation. Meanwhile, the creature roamed the country, innocent in his origins, confused and bereft until he met a poor family. Staying hidden, he watched them until he learned their language and many of the characteristics that the poor family had. Touched by the love that they had for one another and aware of his own paternal rejection, he searched out his former father looking for some kind of connection. He found him, but the father spurned him once again, driving the monster to kill most of the young doctor's family. When the monster finally cornered Dr. Frankenstein, he asked for a mate, but the doctor refused and the two were driven to kill the other. In the end, Dr. Frankenstein dies but the monster finds no salvation in his death. Shelley's ghost story transcended the typical archetype, becoming one of the first science fiction stories. In her tale, the man became the monster and the monster was searching for his humanity in a world of darkness. These themes, while not new, helped define a new genre of fiction and open the doors for many to explore the greater themes of man while within a science fictional narrative.

Up until the time that *Frankenstein* was published, books and novels at this time were a part of the English Romantic movement and involved authors such as Lord Byron, William Wordsworth and William Blake. However, the Industrial Revolution was compelling writers to search for a way to represent the progression and advances in science and culture. In an article by J.M. van der Laan, titled “Frankenstein as Science Fiction and Fact,” he argues that Shelley was not trying to represent literal scientific advances, but rather a metaphor for technical innovations. Frankenstein and his story reveal “scientific and technological motivation, inquiry, and practice; about scientific presumption, audacity, and amorality; about uncontrolled and uncontested scientific and technological experimentation and advance; and about their consequences (299).” Clearly, Shelley’s novel indicated a further push into an advancing world, one in which the morality of science was being called into question.

Science, technology and the future all exist in literature, but science fiction literature specifically offers readers a unique perspective into mankind’s development and the evolution of our species. This genre challenges our conception of the future and pushes students and readers out of their comfort zone to question morality and responsibility in a revolutionary way. A close look into the history of science fiction reveals that authors were attempting to advance many preconceived notions about the world while offering a distinctive perspective about life. However, many science fiction books have not historically been included into many school’s curriculums because of the way they challenge the standard canon and conservative way of thinking. Science fiction texts should not be disregarded, but embraced into English curriculum alongside the regularly taught canon since they can enhance critical thinking and provide unique perspectives into mankind and the future as well as providing novel insight into scientific theories and developments.

Since the publication of *Frankenstein*, science fiction started to be seen as a way into some of the more dangerous and contemplative subjects that many other writers could not approach. Jules Verne and H.G. Wells took up the torch in the latter half of the 19th century and helped expand the view that science fiction could be taken seriously. H.G. Wells started writing novels that reflected contemporary issues by creating fascinating, wholly unbelievable stories and novels. In *The Time Machine*, Wells looks at discrepancies between the rich elite and the poor that were plaguing England during that same time. He fashions a story that emphasizes the differences between the two classes but also brings to light many of the changes that need to be made before we separate as species. In his novel, a scientist makes a time machine that carries him 800,000 years into the future where humans have diverged into separate species. The Eloi represent the upper class, who live lives of relative ease and all their cares are tended to by the Morlock, who dwell beneath the surface. The Morlock represent the lower class, who work underground with complex machinery. But while this novel may seem fanciful, its application in the classroom could be beneficial to students who are learning about evolution, class distinctions or the Industrial Revolution. Andrea Bixler argues in her article “Teaching Evolution with the Aid of Science Fiction” that reading *The Time Machine* while teaching evolution can help her students since it illustrates the concepts of progression and speciation. Not only does it help explain concepts of “reproductive isolating mechanisms that keep species distinct” but also “in relation to directional, diversifying and stabilizing selection” (338). In the book, the two classes of rich and poor remained so separate and distinct from one another that they turned to different habitats to live in. This separation in turn caused them to evolve away from each other and each society was affected by different environmental issues. In this case, the use of science fiction in

the classroom helps students grasp complicated concepts that could otherwise be difficult to understand.

Wells then challenges the consequences of excessive power when he writes *The Invisible Man*. In this story, a power hungry scientist pushes the realm of the impossible when he creates an elixir that turns him invisible. Drunk on power, he soon finds that the consequences of his actions have devastating results when the change becomes permanent and he is forced to the margins of society, doomed to live life as an outcast. Found out for what he is, he must flee in the frigid temperatures of winter before finally succumbing to exposure. This type of narrative came at a time when the Industrial Revolution was in its full power and scientific advance were being made in the fields of electricity, transportation and social dynamics. Wells questions the advances of the day, posing the question that *although we can, should we?* In another one of his books, *First Men in the Moon*, Wells once again challenges the boundaries of what man is capable of when the technology of the moment propels people forward into the unknown without considering the consequences. When two men build a contraption that would allow them to visit the moon and its inhabitants, the peaceful mission goes awry when they soon find themselves misunderstood and hunted down. Again, in an age of colonialism and colonization, *First Men in the Moon* creates a narrative that reflects the repercussions of first contact. These issues were important to the men of Wells' time and he highlighted their importance by framing these stories in fantastic ways. Students learning about this time in human history would find the book insightful. The allegory created gives them a first hand experience about the dangers of colonizing other countries.

Jules Verne, a contemporary of Wells, accomplished much of what Wells sought to do but set his focus differently. In *The Meteor Hunt*, two friendly astronomers both lay claim to the

same meteor, creating a rift between their families and eventually the entire town they live in. When the meteor turns out to be made of gold, the entire world watches and waits as news about where its impact will take place. Sweden gets the honors, causing thousands, including the astronomers, to face perilous seas and devastating cold to greet the comet in person. Fortune does not favor them, or the many who watch as the comet slips into the sea, never to be recovered again. The astronomers return home, tired but again friends. Thematically, the novel revolves around the quest for fame and fortune, but the end result is that there is no place like home. Much in the same way Voltaire philosophizes in *Candide*, Verne tells a story in which the actions leading up to the way of riches and power turn out to be fruitless, and the men see that their quest was folly since it nearly sacrificed their friendship and home. But while these reflections are not new, Verne frames them in a science fiction story of imaginable happenstance. He goes one step further in *Around the World in 80 Days*, where the persistence, resilience and perseverance of Philius Fogg leads a motley crew around the world on the basis of a bet. Hunted by lawmen, besieged by delay and slowed by the simple mistakes of his steward, Fogg surpasses all by crossing dangerous seas and treacherous lands to make it back in time. Before he left, he was a quiet, rich man who idled his days away playing whist. When the bet was proposed, he risked half his fortune to see the betters wrong. While he imagined that he would travel and return to his life as usual, he ends up finding himself and love along the way. Fogg is triumphant in the bet, but the journey changed him for the better. Again, Verne speaks to the growth of the inner soul by framing his story in the narrative of global travel. At the time, a quest like this would have been unheard of, but Verne pushes the envelope yet again.

The fantastic ideas of Verne and Wells and the serious themes that permeated their literature triggered their titles as the Fathers of Science Fiction. They set the stage for other

writers to follow, drafting stories challenging the boundaries that technologies and social issues of their time. Authors such as Aldous Huxley, Philip K. Dick, George Orwell and many others have taken up this torch and transformed the way we look at science fiction; once a fun way of telling stories, now an important tool for grasping the advances made by the scientists of our time.

Aldous Huxley, a science fiction writer in the early 20th century, continued the work led by Wells and Verne when he wrote *Brave New World* in 1946. Called a dystopia, his novel revolves around the negative ways our society will progress in the future. Everything is controlled by the government, who maintain control over their society by a series of genetic tweaks and subliminal domination. In Huxley's story, people are grown in factories where genetic modification is done in test tubes to separate the people into specific classes. The lower classes, Deltas, Gammas and Epsilons have their breathing restricted or alcohol added to the blood stream to restrict the intelligence and increase its working productivity. They are also grown in identical groups, where each set can have up to one hundred matching people. Upper class people, Alphas and Betas, are lucky enough to be allowed to develop naturally from one fetus. But all people are given messages in their sleep to train them all to think the same way. The lower classes are given messages that make them feel fortunate they are the labor class and happy with little in the way of compensation. The upper classes are given messages that teach them about casual, yet safe sex and the urge to constantly be buying things. These people therefore have behavioral modifications brainwashed into them, to be compliant, productive members of society where questioning authority is never allowed and free or critical thinking practically unheard of. And everyone takes soma, a drug that allows the user to become completely docile and dreamlike. The few people who don't live like this are on reservations and

are called 'savages.' They still live the way humans do now, but independence is feared by the rest of the population and they are trained to ridicule them. The novel's plot revolves around a relationship between a savage and an Alpha and the culture clash that ensues.

There are many themes in *Brave New World* that address modern society. Huxley uses genetic modifications as a part of the creation of his world, a place where family doesn't exist and humans are grown in labs. In an article titled "Our Brave New World Today," Richard Stivers says that the government in the world that Huxley creates "forces people to be happy through various scientific techniques of manipulation and control. It is a world of control in and through pleasure. Real freedom is abandoned for it invariably brings conflict, anxiety, and suffering" (248). Huxley looked at the world he lived in and extrapolated some of the things that he saw. Indeed, we are now constantly surrounded by mass marketing images, pressured to be a part of social groups and clubs, surrounded by a drug culture with aspirations for total disconnection. Although Huxley wrote this book over sixty years ago, he imagined the future and many of the core patterns that permeate our culture today. Stivers agrees: "Huxley understood perfectly well that efficiency, order, and conformity are the paramount concerns in a technological civilization" (250). As our students grow up in this world, the importance of *Brave New World* bears refreshing significance. Simply imagine the addiction to Facebook, home to one billion people: a place where everyone is connected to each other, messages are instantaneous, ideas are spread and homogenized and dissenters are dismissed. Sounds like 'efficiency, order, and conformity' to me.

These themes are also continued a few years later, in 1949 with the landmark publication of *1984*, by George Orwell. A monumental work of science fiction, the book tells of a world where the government controls every aspect of people's lives, represented by the image of Big

Brother. Here, people are constantly monitored for negative thoughts or emotions, everyday items are doled out to the citizens, language has been reduced to a shortened form called Newspeak and the world is constantly at war. In this way, the government controls the thoughts and emotions of its citizenry, establishing its dominance over the people. Similar to *Brave New World*, *1984* also contains a segment of society that lives freely. They are called the ‘proles,’ the uneducated working class. The story focuses around Winston, a man who searches for his freedom to be himself in an increasingly tyrannical state. This book is vitally important to the canon of high school curriculum since it challenges students to think for themselves and challenge oppressive governments.

While the United States has always been a world superpower, our educational standards have fallen. Other countries have far surpassed the academic curve in reading writing and math. In order to remain competitive in the future, schools and universities must find alternative and innovative ways to outdistance their competitors. Incorporating science fiction into the canon of acceptable reading material can help achieve this. Not only can fresh literature revive the literacy rate, it can also provide fresh approaches to understanding complicated theories that dominate scientific research. Many teachers advocate the use of such material, knowing that it can help their students get valuable insight into advancing scientific fields.

In an article by Elaine J. O’Quinn and Heather Atwell, “Familiar Aliens: Science Fiction as Social Commentary,” the authors make the case that understanding the narratives of science fiction stories and movies can help students grasp the implications of certain controversial subjects. They claim that “teachers unfamiliar with science fiction cannot offer their student the wealth of texts that deal seriously with a variety of complex, contemporary social issues, some of which have obvious tie-ins to technology” (Atwell, Quinn, 45). These issues can include issues

such as immigration, cloning, genetic modification and more. In the past hundred years, the world has seen science and technology advance at an alarming rate. In 1910 we barely had a working motor vehicle while a mere fifty years later, we went all the way to moon and back. In the past few decades, we have successfully cloned animals, sent rovers to Mars, decoded the human genome and created nuclear and cellular technology. Many of these advances surround us at all times, and our schools struggle for a way to teach their students how to face these developments and the moral issues that surround them. Using science fiction can help students grasp these difficult concepts they need to learn. According to O'Quinn and Atwell, "young people need books that inspire them to question and challenge their world" because "science fiction approaches issues of techno science to specifically appeal to adolescents" (46).

Understanding the developments that are happening in the world that students will grow up in can be helped by reading literature about that topic. Many of the books that appear on standard high school reading lists cannot help students think globally about serious scientific issues.

One of these issues is spoken of directly in "Cyberpunk Cities: Science Fiction Meets Urban Theory," by Carl Abbott. While many teachers may find it difficult to teach science fiction, Abbott argues that a sub-genre of science fiction, called cyberpunk, is actively being used to advance theories of urban planning. Communication systems, international transit systems and disaster scenarios are a few of the things that science fiction novels can help students prepare for. Abbott states that science fiction writers are "far reaching in time, crammed with speculations about new technology, and full of serious and satirical extrapolations of social trends" (123). These are writers that are pushing the boundaries of what could happen in the future and the students can prepare for any eventuality. In some cases, the future is happening now. Writers once only dreamed of places where communication "takes over the very fabric of

buildings and infrastructure” (126), but now it is actually occurring. Our own surroundings are becoming landscapes for video screens and advertisements. Standing in line at the bank, there are televisions set into the walls to entertain and distract customers while injecting advertisements between installments. At the gas pump, video screens have been built into the units so even while filling up the tank we are surrounded by breaking news and information, the latest popular celebrity gossip and the best deals at the local store. Science and technology are breaking through new barriers every day, and students must learn to understand these implications they pose.

In the book *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*, Philip K. Dick provides readers with a story that deals with the consequences that these technological advances present. In his novel, the world has been at war for so long that most all living animals have become extinct. For most people, the idea that they could possibly own a living creature drives them to succeed. But for those who cannot afford it, corporations such as the Tyrell Corporation provide not only realistic animals, but androids as well. These androids have been created with such lifelike human qualities that they soon pose a danger to the rest of society. When they act out in criminal acts, bounty hunters like Rick Deckard must find them and administer tests to determine whether they are human or not. The lines between what is real and what isn't start to become blurred, as Deckard begins to question himself and the others he hunts. This book looks closely at the standard ways in which we judge humanity and life itself. If a robot can behave nearly identically to a human, then students can discuss the various ways in which we define being alive. Christopher Sims, in his paper “The Dangers of Individualism and the Human Relationship to Technology in Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*” argues “that technology can be used as a guide to return the survivors of World War Terminus to the

humanity that they have abandoned for solipsistic individualism” (68). He extends his argument by building on the idea that technology can be used to help save the humanity in Dick’s world. Students can then continue discussion on the topic of technology and whether it poses a threat or help. *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* provides the forum for these topics to be addressed in a way that other literature simply could not. But in order to learn about the effects that these types of technologies can have on our lives, we must make the time to discuss the uses of science fiction and how to include it into our schools.

Diane Zigo and Michael Moore contribute to this burgeoning discussion of embracing science fiction into school curriculum. In an article they write called “Chicken Soup for the Science Fiction Soul: Breaking the Genre Lock in the High School Literary Experience,” they advocate for the inclusion of science fiction texts into the curriculum for students because of its “potential as an appropriate genre for fostering critical literacy and critical/creative thinking within high school classrooms” (40). Science fiction redefines the way we think about stories and literature, forcing readers to think beyond traditional means. Many of the books we had to read in school (*Catcher in the Rye*, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Lord of the Flies*, *The Grapes of Wrath*) have historical significance but fall short of some of the newer themes emerging in literature. While we should never forget the lessons learned from these times, teachers and educators must face that the world that existed then no longer exists anymore. Our students and children today are growing up in a world that surrounds them with technology in a way that never happened even just twenty years ago. The only way to allow for them to address the concerns of an ever advancing society is to introduce literature that specifically has to do with it.

Fortunately, there are many ways that science fiction literature can be usefully utilized in the classroom without sacrificing many of the required classic texts. In many cases, these books can actually enhance the messages and themes that are being discussed. For example, Margaret Atwood, one of the leading writers in the field of science fiction, crafts incredibly detailed books whose themes parallel other, more readily assigned texts. *The Handmaid's Tale*, published in 1985, falls into this category. Set in a dystopian future where the United States government is replaced by totalitarian Christian fundamentalists, the book explores women's suffrage and their complete and utter removal of rights following the regime change. Offred, the protagonist, is separated from her husband and daughter and soon becomes a 'handmaid' of the Commander. Her duty is to become pregnant since the wife is assumed sterile. The world she lives in believes in the complete removal of any female rights, an idea that continues to become popular through media and social outlets. However, Offred offers the readers an intimate look into the life of one wronged woman.

Many books have probed into the lives of women since historically, they have almost always had limited rights in comparison to their male counterparts. This stems from the patriarchy that has dominated our culture for the past two millennia. And many other writers have explored the role of women in society, but Atwood takes the reader into a first person account of an alternate future where the modern rules don't necessarily apply. Her work is bold, and has been compared to another writer of a wronged women, Nathaniel Hawthorne. In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hester Prynne wears a scarlet 'A' on her chest to signify to the entire town that she has committed adultery and bore a child, Pearl, out of wedlock. As the story develops, the reader soon learns that her noble, humble life is a testament to the conservative minded leaders of her community, showing that she can rise above the sins of others while keeping her dark

secret. This book is nearly always taught in high school classrooms, but could be benefited by comparing it to Atwood's book. Alice Drum, in an article titled, "Raising Voice: Women Writers and the Challenge to Traditional Narrative Form," expounds the work of Nancy Walker, who wrote *The Disobedient Writer: Women and the Narrative Tradition*. Drum discusses Walker's work, who "considers Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* as a complex reworking of *The Scarlet Letter*" (Drum, 177). Indeed, the books have parallels to them; they both revolve around a wronged woman who lacks any power or self-identity, struggling to survive. Walker claims that the narrative standpoint is essential in both books. In *The Scarlet Letter*, the story is told from "a moralistic third person perspective" while Offred "not only describes the action of the narrative, she also stands outside and offers ironic commentary" (Drum, 177). This shift in the voice of the protagonist shows a development in the literature of the 'wronged woman' and can be utilized by teachers to demonstrate a recurring theme in society. Students can benefit from a first person perspective; they can fight alongside Offred and cheer her on.

Furthermore, *The Handmaid's Tale* can initiate discussions about the comparisons to other societies. Cheryl Laz, of The University of Southern Maine, routinely uses this book in her sociology classes to open a dialogue on alternate societies. She argues that "SF [science fiction] novels are especially useful because they implicitly or explicitly question existing social arrangements" (Laz, 55). These social arrangements are described at length in the narration of the book, but readers and students can begin to draw comparisons to other restrictive societies, such as strict Islam, or Western society before women were allowed any rights. This story forces students to grasp the implication of a racist, homophobic government and the consequences of totalitarian control.

Fear of the government and totalitarian control stems from an ongoing theme in literature. *The Puppet Masters*, by Robert Heinlein is a classic science fiction text from 1951 that looks at what life would be like if alien parasites invaded human hosts via connecting to the base of the head. The setting of the book takes place in the future, 2007, thereby allowing the reader to experience an invasion safely by distancing it from the modern period in time. Meanwhile, the characters the book, Sam, his wife Mary and his commander, Old Man, must learn to distinguish between human and alien as they attempt to launch a virus that will infect the alien 'slugs' and save humanity. There is a constant element of fear throughout the novel as they attempt to ward off the invading force, but they are constantly stymied by the incredibly normal outward appearance of infected humans.

In this way, the book corresponds to another, very real, moment in United States history. In the 1950's, America was in the middle of the Red Scare, a time where the government was blacklisting any suspected communists. Senator Joe McCarthy led the campaign, identifying hundreds of citizens as communists and perpetuating the fear of a communist invasion from Russia. The nation was terrified, and Heinlein sought to capture that terror in his book. This idea is discussed by Christopher Lockett in his paper "Domesticity as Redemption in *The Puppet Masters*: Robert A. Heinlein's Model for Consensus." He argues that the "paranoia of communist infiltration and nuclear war surface in figuration of alien invasions" (Lockett, 45). It was easy for writers of that time to compare the feared communist invasion with alien life since that way of thinking was so unlike American culture and diplomacy. Russia was very much like an alien country, with eyes on taking over the United States and stripping the American people of all they held dear. Furthermore, "the aliens are explicitly featured throughout the novel as infectious parasites, a trope consistent with the Cold War rhetoric that characterized communism

as a disease” (Lockett, 53). People were disassociating themselves with communists similarly to the way they would disassociate themselves with anything non-human. They demonized communists as they demonized the slugs.

Demonizing the other is analogous to the play “The Crucible” by Arthur Miller. A play about the Salem witch trials written in 1953, the story revolves around the town as they target witches with very little evidence. Afraid of their suspected doings, the people in the town eventually burn the accused at the stake to purify them. This idea was common in the Red Scare, as citizens were targeted as suspected communists or supporters with little evidence, and Miller wrote his play to be an allegory of what the government was doing. Students often have to read this play in high school, but pairing it with *The Puppet Masters* can bring valuable insight to a world where everyone is a potential enemy. Within both texts, there is a fear of the outsiders where an invasion could (or does) happen with little identify the infiltrators or stop them.

However, Zigo and Moore rightly express caution in their article, “Chicken Soup for the Science Fiction Soul: Breaking the Genre Lock in the High School Literary Experience.”

Teachers considering including science fiction into their curriculum must

“make careful selections of texts relevant to topics being studied and appropriate for the reading abilities and experiences of students in their classes. In some cases, censorship issues must be considered since some SF stories may include graphic depictions of violence, sexual situations, or conversational expletives” (41-42).

As in all texts teachers and administrators decide to give to their students, there must be oversight to determine whether or not the book is pertinent and suitable to the class. This concern is something that Zigo and Moore discuss in another article they wrote together called “Science Fiction: Serious Reading, Critical Reading.” They express that certain barriers existed that

prevented them from pursuing teaching science fiction in their classrooms, such as “curricular constraints, unavailability of books and [their] questions about to introduce such books to a classroom of students rather than as recommendations to individual readers” (86). These barriers are what prevent science fiction from being recognized as a serious form of fiction to many traditional teachers.

Yet, a close look at the development and history of science fiction as serious literature demonstrates the importance of such material. These texts offer insights into an evolving world dealing with technological advances and the implications they possess. *The Time Machine*, *Brave New World* and *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* all inspire student to think outside the box and learn what kind of future is in store if society is allowed to progress without any safeguards. No other literature can provide this type of dialogue. Furthermore, pairing science fiction books with other more classic novels can enhance the themes that are presented with both. In this way, the books can be exposed to readers and students while offering a safe glimpse into the ways that science fiction can actually enhance their education. For students to truly develop as critical thinker in a quickly advancing world, science fiction must be embraced into curriculum to challenge their thinking and question the future.

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