

ISSN: 0976-8165

The Criterion

An International Journal in English

Bi-monthly Refereed and Indexed Open Access eJournal

5th Year of Open Access

Vol. 5, Issue-6 December 2014

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A Study of Scientific Romances in Context to Other Literary Genres

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Abstract:

The term 'genre' is derived from French language signifying literary form. Generally speaking all the works of literature are classified into some literary genre or the other. The most commonly known literary forms since the ancient times are the tragedy, comedy, epic, satire and lyric. Northrop Fry in his *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) has classified the literary works under four major literary genres that is; the comedy, the romance, the tragedy and the satire to these some new forms have been added such as the novel, the essay and the biography. Nowadays the term novel applies to all variety of prose fiction, although in most of the European languages novel stands for "roman" which is derived from the medieval 'romance'. Since its flowering in the late nineteenth century the novel has received popularity to an extent that all the other literary forms have taken a backseat in the present times. In this paper I have tried to study the scientific romances of H.G. Wells in context to other traditional literary genres and bring to light their development into a full-fledged literary genre by itself which later became popular as science fiction.

Keywords: Genre, Romance, Scientific, Traditional, Literary, Fiction.

In order to study the scientific romances in context to other literary genres we need to go back to the chivalric romance of the Middle Ages and the Gothic novel of the late eighteenth century which can be called the ancestors of prose romance. Malory's *Morte de' Arthur* deserves special mention as it marks the birth of romances in England, it was the first English book in poetic prose and Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516) can be considered as another important book which had germs of the present day novel. Gradually the medieval romance lost its popularity with the advent of picaresque tales of adventure which later resulted in the development of heroic romance which came into significance with the publication of Sir Philip Sydney's *Arcadia* in 1590. The heroic romances also did not survive for very long, paving the way for the novel of realism and this shift from romance to realism can best be seen in the works of John Bunyan and Daniel Defoe. But the novel failed to flourish for a very long time because the Elizabethan Age was the golden age of drama. Besides the popularity of drama there was also lack of suitable English prose language which curtailed the rise of English novel. The eighteenth century was no less fecund in the creation of the other worlds and imaginary voyages of discovery. The two most important works were Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726). These two books satisfied the quest for knowledge and adventure and

had a long lasting impact on prose fiction in general, but it was Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) which can be held responsible for the evolution of science fiction as a separate literary genre in itself.

A broad study of the different genres in English literature brings to light one important fact, that is the significance of romance in literature. Compared to other literary genres, whether in poetic form or prose form, romance continued to be popular since the beginning till the present day. In fact the field of romance is so vast and varied that it can be further sub-divided into different types of romances such as; the medieval romance, the heroic romance and the latest addition of scientific romance. When we compare and contrast these scientific romances in context to other traditional literary genres like the romance, the epic, the fable, the historical novel, the realistic novel, the satire and parody we realize that in spite of the fact that the scientific romances consists of some elements from these popular literary forms they constitute an altogether separate genre in itself which is today branded as the science fiction which is respectably treated with such seriousness which otherwise was not given to it earlier because of the age old stigma of 'pulp fiction' attached to it.

Now let us study these scientific romances in context to some of the traditional literary genres from which it has derived many important elements. First of all the traditional romance, after which it has taken its name the 'scientific romance', deserves special attention. They both have many elements in common, the foremost is the element of adventure and fantasy. In fact it has made use of romance as the fundamental and the universal mode of narration because romance has an old and honoured place in the history of English literature, bridging the gap between literature and para-literature and its immense popularity influences the minds of literary critics when they make any judgement on any particular branch of literary writing. In fact if we look closely we notice that westerns, thrillers, historical novel, erotic literature, love stories and adventures of such heroes as Tarzan and James Bond can be classified under the heading of romance because a romance is, as argued by Gillian Beer; "essentially subjective literary form presenting an absorbing, coherent and yet arbitrary vision of the world, which the reader can only enter at the price of a willing surrender to the writer's authority."(1)

In this way we can say that even the science fiction falls under the heading of romance because the devices which are generally associated with science fiction are the provision of a rational and logical rather than quasi-scientific explanation of the fictitious events, the projection of future or alternative world with the style that makes the narration of the events plausible. If a writer of romance makes use of his arbitrary judgement, the science fiction writers cloak that arbitrariness under the mask of necessity and the writer of realistic fiction hides the fundamental arbitrariness under the garb of verisimilitude. Science fiction has been described as a romance basically because its subject matter is essentially romantic in nature; presenting the sheer excitement as well as the horrors of the new vistas opened up by the progress and development of science and technology but its purpose is not just to amaze and astound its readers, therefore, science fiction being termed as 'literature of wonder' is not completely true. In fact science fiction comes much

closer to be regarded as ‘contemporary mythology’ as it offers such tales of adventure and fantasy which deals with the prospects and destiny of man and his universe. This brand of fiction has a small section of the society as its ardent devotees who are the believers of scientific principles and theories and use it as a mode of expression for today’s ideological fantasies by first estranging the readers by presenting the transformed world to them but at the same time making this new world familiar and comprehensible for them. As H.G. Wells had remarked that the writers’ task is to “domesticate the impossible hypothesis”. This process of domestication of the strange and alien phenomenon brings the scientific romances closer to realistic novels. Thus we can conclude that the science fiction in spite of all its romantic elements does not fall naturally into the category of romances in the traditional sense, it can in fact be termed as a romance cloaked in science-fictional realism.

Now let us consider another literary form, the traditional fable; a short and simple story giving some moral teaching which falls under the category of ‘instructive fiction’. In the modern times most of the literature can be classified under the headings of ‘social fable’ and ‘moral fable’ because generally a writer considers it as his moral responsibility to impart some form of teaching or the other to his readers. As far as science fiction is concerned its objective is social criticism just as the realistic fiction studies human relationships. In the opinion of Darko Suvin the formal framework of science fiction is one of ‘cognitive estrangement’, but we observe that; “.....the estrangement effect is contained and neutralized by their conventionality in other respects. The result is that the familiar reality is replaced by an all too familiar unreality”. (2)

The modern view of the world is completely scientific because it derives its concepts from the field of not only biology but also physics, astronomy and cybernetics and it emphasizes the fact that in spite of man’s insignificance in the entire cosmos he has knowledge of scientific principles and is capable of turning this knowledge of the cosmos into the knowledge of power. This leads to dividing the science fiction tales into two classes; epistemological fables or fables of knowledge for eg. H.G. Wells’ *The Time Machine* (1895) or Stanislaw Lem’s *Solaris* (1973) and the fables of power for eg. H.G. Wells’ *Things to Come* (1935), Blish’s *A Case of Conscience* and Clarke’s *Childhood’s End*. Mostly these two categories overlap each other but as the fables of power the scientific tales tend to become anti-utopian because the utopian social ideal is basically community based. Wells and his intellectual successors later made shift from the social ideal to the ‘mind of the race’ confronting the unknown in order to save the human race from self-destruction. The man’s conquest of nature is symbolized in science fiction by the foundation of galactic empire because with the development of space craft and space travel can establish his supremacy in the universe and this concept seems rather anti-utopian as it projects the idea of this galactic empire been controlled by men and threatened by aliens making the universe invariably a theatre of war. This presentation of hard-headed galactic imperialism in science fiction came for much reproach because man cannot achieve a civilization where his problems are completely solved and curiosity finally rested. As a result since 1960s there has been a dramatic revival of interest in utopian ideas among the science fiction writers. This

change in the outlook of contemporary utopianism is to some extent running parallel to the latest developments and progress in the field of science and its strong possibility that the conflict between scientific ideas and utopian ideals will continue to reproduce itself in various new forms as the genre of science fiction develops further.

Another traditional literary form to which science fiction comes closer to is the classic epic form because the events portrayed in science fiction are of a certain magnitude; the space travel, the canvas of its action is vast; the entire universe, its characters are certainly not ordinary for e.g. ; the scientists, astronauts, the aliens etc. and it has a cosmic and universal appeal involving the entire mankind. This concern for the future of human race has also earned it the status of 'vision literature' a branch of futurology or in other words the science of social forecasting and thus raising the science fiction writers to the status of social prophets and the tale of the future is the main representative of the epic mode in science fiction .Thus we find that; "Science fiction is often closer than realistic fiction to the old epics by virtue of its universal scale, the scope it allows for heroic enterprise, and its concern with man's confrontation with non- empirical and extra terrestrial forces." (3) But the science fiction epics find it very difficult to present their futuristic views in convincing details, therefore, they are brief and allegorical and can be termed as the truncated epic or an epic fable rather than the long continuous narratives of classical form of epics comprising of twelve books! Wells' *The Time Machine* (1895) is the best example of this kind where a voyage of thirty million years into future has been narrated in around 30,000 words. Patrick Parrinder has rightly pointed out that; "Epic science fiction in the commercial sense invariably involves space travel, since space is the last natural frontier, and thus the appropriate setting for a new heroic age of exploration, adventure and imaginary wars. The story of how Earth, or some other homeland, was saved is a plausible substitute for the old national epic, concerned with the establishment and defense of the realm." (4) The recent trends in the field of science fiction have shown that sometimes the term 'epic' is misused for promotion policies by publishers and film scriptwriters in order to provide grandeur to the subject matter. This results in its earning, but neglect from the literary critics of the genre who are put off by such superficial claims because these run-of-the-mill 'space epics' are usually adorned by stock figures and stereo type situations of the conventional romance as a result one must be careful that the principle grounds for calling some science fiction epic, as opposed to romance, are that it deals with the alternative history and is basically futuristic rather than loosely attributing the term 'epic' to the entire genre of science fiction which may include some pulp fiction. The use of conventions and stereotypes in science fiction brings elements of parody and satire. In fact Michel Butor has suggested in a controversial essay that; "... science fiction writers should collaborate in developing a 'collective myth' of the future which would exert a constraining power over the individual writer's imagination." (5)

Recently it has been observed that science fiction writers have the tendency to approach this concept of "collective myth" of the genre in a spirit of self-conscious imitation and parody. One of the best example is Wells' *The War of the Worlds* (1898) whose literary diaspora extends its

tentacles to every twentieth century narrative of invasion from outer space .It has been adapted a number of times including the radio and film adaptations. It also has imitations and sequels as George H. Smith's *The Second War of the Worlds* (1976) which narrates the invasion of another planet by Wells' identical creatures. Even John Wyndham's *The Day of the Triffids* (1951) and Ursula Le Guins' *The Lathe of Heaven* (1971) belong to the sub-genre originated by Wells through *The War of the Worlds*. Besides these Christopher Priest's *The Space Machine* (1976) and Arkady and Boris Stugatsky's *The Second Martian Invasion* (1968) are considered to be conscious attempts at parody and pastiche but Kurt Vonneguts Jr.'s *The Sirens of Titan* (1959) is an example of full blown parody of the 'Martian invasion' theme.

To conclude one can say that a work of art can be given the status of a classic only when it embodies all the elements and potentialities of the literary genre to which it belongs and this term should not be freely used for all kinds of science fiction irrespective of their themes and contents. Perhaps H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine* (1895) has been accepted universally by writers, readers, literary critics and theorists alike as a generic masterpiece which deserves the status of a classic. Besides *The Time Machine* Stanislaw Lems' *Solaris* (1961) has also received wide spread acclaim and can be termed as a science-fictional classic because it exemplifies the creative fusion of romance, fable, epic and parody. As we trace the growth of scientific romances we realize that although they started as a sub-genre of the traditional romances but gradually developed into a full- fledged genre by itself which later came to be known as science fiction which proved complementary to the progress of scientific thought in the present age of science and technology. Earlier ninety percent of the science fiction readers were males, generally scientists and technicians but now its readership includes women, college students and graduates from humanities and social sciences. The reason is that nowadays many of the science fiction writers and their works have become part of the literature syllabus taught at college and university level. This has given a big boost which was required to treat science fiction as serious fiction rather than as pulp fiction. So now it can be said that when we discuss the types of romances it will include scientific romances besides the medieval romance and the heroic romance and when the various types of fiction will be classified it will include the name of science fiction with all the respectability which a literary genre deserves.

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- 3) Ibid., pp. 90 and 91.
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- 5) Michel Butor, *The Crisis in the Growth of Science Fiction*, in *Inventory* trans. Richard Howard, Cape, (London, 1970).