

## “All these worlds are yours:” the Appeal of Science Fiction, Part I

I’ve been fascinated with science fiction stories for as long as I can remember, although, I must confess, I never thought of science fiction as being mainstream literature. I, like many readers, pursued science fiction as a form of escapism, a way to keep up with speculation on recent scientific discoveries, or just a way to pass the time.

It wasn’t until I met with my thesis adviser to celebrate the approval of my paper that I had to think about science fiction in a new light. My adviser works for a large, well-known literary foundation that is considered to be very “canonical” in its tastes. When he asked me if I liked science fiction, and if I would be willing to select about one hundred stories for possible inclusion in an anthology that they were thinking about producing, I was somewhat surprised. When he told me it might lead to a paying gig, I became even more astounded. I went home that afternoon feeling very content: my paper had been approved, and I might get a *paying* job to select science fiction, of all things.

Then it hit me: I’d actually have to seriously think about some sort of a method to select from the thousands of science fiction short stories that had been written in the past century. When I considered that the ideals of the foundation would have to be reflected in the stories which I selected, something near panic set in: science fiction was not part of the “cannon.”

“While I pondered weak and weary, over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore,” I reached a decision: I’d first try to figure out what science fiction “was,” and then I’d develop a set of themes that related to the essence of science fiction. So, armed with this battle plan, I proceeded to read what several famous authors had to say about science fiction. This seemed simple enough, until I discovered that no two authors thought science fiction meant quite the same thing. Oh, great, thought I: “nevermore.” (Sorry, Edgar, I couldn’t resist).

Having failed to discover the essence of science fiction, I selected four authors whose work I liked to try to determine what they contributed to the art of science fiction. The authors were: Isaac Asimov, Robert Silverberg, Orson Scott Card, and Arthur C Clarke. At the time, I didn’t realize that two of the authors, Asimov and Clarke were considered “hard” science fiction writers, and the other two, Silverberg and Card, were considered “soft” science fiction writers.

So, you might ask: what is the difference between “hard” and “soft” science fiction. I’m glad you asked, else I would have to stop writing right about now. “Hard” science fiction is concerned with an understanding of quantitative sciences, such as astronomy, physics, chemistry, etc. “Soft” science fiction is often associated with the humanities or social sciences, such as sociology, psychology or economics. Of course, some writers blend “hard” and “soft” science fiction into their work, as Asimov did in the *Foundation* trilogy.

So, having selected the authors, I was ready to proceed to my next challenge, which you can read about in the next installment of the series.

## “All these worlds are yours:” the Appeal of Science Fiction, Part II

In the first part of the series, I mentioned that I’d been given an assignment to select approximately one hundred science fiction short stories for inclusion in an anthology that was being considered by a literary foundation. Originally, I’d intended to find the “essence” of science fiction, and then select stories that reflected this essence. Unfortunately, this turned out to be nearly impossible, since different authors had different ideas about what constituted science fiction.

So, I took the easy way out, I selected four authors whose works appealed to me, and hoped that I could make selection based upon my familiarity with their works. My selection process resulted in four authors who have been writing science fiction for thirty years or more: Isaac Asimov, Robert Silverberg, Orson Scott Card, and Arthur C Clarke. As it turned out, two authors were considered “hard” science fiction writers, and two were considered “soft” science fiction writers.

Well, I finally had a plan. And then the wheels fell off. I still needed some sort of selection criteria, or I’d have to develop one as I read. So, I did what anyone in my place would have done. I started reading. I read, and read some more, and then . . . I read some more. Over three thousand pages and three hundred short stories, in fact. I was almost ready to make a stab at a selection process; almost, but not quite.

What, three thousand pages, and still can’t figure out how to start? How could this be? Okay, so I’m exaggerating a little bit. I started to break the stories up into groupings around general themes—it helps when I organize things into groups, so I can apply some sort of selection criteria for seemingly unrelated data points (who says that thirty years in business doesn’t have its rewards)? Gradually, I began grouping the stories into several broad headings: scientific discoveries; life-forms (which included aliens, man-made life and artificial life); the search for meaning (which includes the search for God or the gods); the death of a group of men, a nation, race, or system; the meaning of morality.

Now I admit, these groupings may be arbitrary, and may in fact reflect my perspective on things, but I had to start somewhere. The strange thing was that these grouping tended to repeat, no matter who the author was. When I thought about it, these same types of concerns are mirrored in the more “canonical” texts that are taught in school. So, what makes science fiction different from the mainstream texts taught in colleges and universities across the country?

Once again, I’m glad you asked that, because it is a perfect lead-in to the next part of the series.

### “All these worlds are yours:” the Appeal of Science Fiction, Part III

I guess that the main difference between science fiction and the more acceptable or “canonical” type of fiction must arise either from the themes employed, or the subject matter. In part two of this series, I mentioned that the themes employed by science fiction, namely: the search for life, identity, the gods, and morality are similar to those themes employed in “canonical” literature. By the process of subtraction, that leaves subject matter as the primary difference between the two genres.

So, by subject matter, we must mean science, since we’ve already covered fiction (“when you has eliminate the impossible, whatever is left, no matter how improbable, must be the truth,” as Sherlock Holmes would say). So, we must infer that science is the factor which differentiates science fiction from traditional fiction. By this definition, several traditional pieces of fiction must be considered science fiction. As an example, *The Tempest*, by William Shakespeare has often been cited as a type of science fiction if we expand the category to include those works which incorporate current science into their works. But wait, you say, *The Tempest* does not incorporate science into its construction. Oh really, I reply, the English were just beginning to settle the New World in earnest when the play was written (“Oh, brave new world that has such people in’t.”) Besides, you reply, if anything, it is more fantasy than science fiction. Splitting hairs, I reply.

What then of John Milton, I ask? John Milton . . . why, he’s so boring and well, unread these days, you reply. Of course he is, but that’s beside the point. What about *Paradise Lost*, I rejoin? What about it, you reply (and then in a very low voice . . . I’ve never read it). The scene where Satan leaves hell and takes a cosmic tour before alighting on Earth and Paradise has been described by many critics as being the first instance of an author providing a cosmological view of the heavens. In fact, Milton scholars point to the fact that Milton, in the *Aereopagitica* claims to have visited Galileo Galilei at his home in Italy. These same critics also refer to the fact that Milton taught his nephews astronomy, using several texts that were considered progressive in their day. Still, most critics would fall on their pens (swords being so messy and difficult to come by these days), rather than admit to *Paradise Lost* being . . . gasp, science fiction.

Still not convinced; what do you say about Frankenstein? You say it made for several interesting movies, but really, the creature was overdone; bad make-up and all that. I reply: the make-up is irrelevant; for that matter, so are many of the films, which don’t do justice to Mary Shelley’s novel. She didn’t even write the novel, you reply. Oh no, not another apologist for Percy Bysshe Shelley writing the novel. Let me state unequivocally that I don’t care whether Mary or Percy wrote the novel: it is often cited as the first instance of science fiction. But where is the science, you ask: it is only alluded-to. That’s why it’s also fiction, I retort.

So, where are we? I think we’ve managed to muddle the waters somewhat. It appears that the element of science is needed for science fiction, but the precedents for science being contained in a fictional work, are somewhat troubling. Maybe in the next section, we should examine “modern” science fiction and try to determine how science plays a part in works of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

## “All these worlds are yours:” the Appeal of Science Fiction, Part IV

Up till now, we’ve defined science fiction as part science, and part fiction. No real revolutionary concept there. I’ve tried to show how earlier works could be considered science fiction, with mixed results. I’ve also said that works of the twentieth century would be easier to classify as science fiction, because they incorporate more elements of leading-edge science into their writing.

To use two brief examples, the *Foundation* trilogy by Isaac Asimov is often considered a “soft” science fiction work, relying more on the social sciences than the physical sciences in the plot line. In the story, Asimov posits the creation of a foundation that relies on psychohistory, a kind of melding of group psychology and economics that is useful in predicting and ultimately molding, human behavior. Anyone who has been following the stock and financial markets over the past year can attest to the element of herd mentality which permeates any large scale human interaction. The theme of shaping human dynamics through psychohistory, while somewhat far-fetched is not beyond the realm of possibility (and would, no doubt, be welcomed by market bulls right about now).

A second example from Asimov, that of the three laws of robotics, has taken on a life of its own. Asimov began developing the laws of robotics to explain how a robot might work. The three laws were postulated as a mechanism to protect humans and robots. He did not expect the laws to become so ingrained into the literature on robots; in fact, the laws have become something of a de facto standard in any story or novel written about artificial life, as Asimov has noted in several essays.

The case of Asimov’s three laws of robotics influencing other writers is not unusual. In the case of Arthur C. Clarke, his influence is felt beyond writing and extends to science as well. Clarke is the person responsible for postulating the use of geo-synchronous orbit for satellites, and the makers of weather, communications, entertainment and spy satellites owe him a debt of gratitude for developing this theory. He anticipated the manned landing on the moon, and many discoveries made on Mars, Jupiter, Saturn and their many moons.

Consider also, Orson Scott Card, whose novel *Speaker for the Dead*, postulates a world-wide communication network that is uncannily similar to the world-wide-web and predated the commercial internet by some fifteen to twenty years.

It appears then, that science fiction writers popularize science, provide their readers with a glimpse of the possibilities of new inventions and theories, and sometimes, anticipate or even discover new uses for technology. But there’s still an element missing in our definition of science fiction, that of the fiction side of the equation. We’ll explore the fiction side of science fiction in the next installment.

## “All these worlds are yours:” the Appeal of Science Fiction, Part V

Good literature requires a successful plot, character development, and an emotional appeal in order to be successful. Science fiction is no different than traditional forms of fiction in this regard. We’ve talked about plot and content (science) in earlier installments. In this installment, I’d like to talk about the emotional reactions generated by science fiction.

Broadly speaking, I think science fiction appeals to the following emotional responses: terror, the joy of discovery, awe and wonder, a lassitude born of too many space flights or too many worlds, and a sense of accomplishment. The instances of terror in science fiction are well documented: for anyone who has seen *Alien* for the first time, terror is a very real emotion. Many science fiction and horror writers as well, make good use of the emotion of terror. An effective use of terror is important, however. Slasher movies use terror, but they sometimes degenerate into an almost parodic exercise of who can generate the most gore per minute. True terror is a case of timing and the unexpected. That’s why Arthur C Clarke’s story entitled “A Walk in the Dark” is so effective. The author sets-up the BEM (bug-eyed monster, from Orson Scott Card) as a pursuing agent; the protagonist has no idea that the monster will actually wind-up *in front* of him.

As to the joy of discovery, this emotion can work in reverse. In Orson Scott Card’s brilliant short story and novel, *Ender’s Game*, the child protagonist learns that the war games he was practicing for were actually the real thing. His surprise, remorse and confusion have profound effects on his psyche, and set the stage for his attempts later in life to attain some sort of recompense for the race which he and his cohorts destroyed.

Robert Silverberg’s works evoke a feeling of déjà-vu, a sense of being on too many worlds or too many travels; a moral ennui not found in many writers. Yet somehow, he transcends this eternal boredom to reveal with startling clarity that something lies beyond; if only a sought after end.

Perhaps no other science fiction author offers a sense of wonder and discovery, a sense of joy de vivre, as does Arthur C Clarke. In story after story, Clarke expounds on new worlds, new discoveries, new possibilities (“all these worlds are yours . . .”). His love of the cosmos is rooted in his love of astronomy and physics, and is bundled together with a love of mankind that makes his work so inspiring and evergreen.

But what of our final category, that of a sense of accomplishment? Each of these writers talks in some way to the human experience. In bridging the worlds of science and fiction, in writing to our fears, hopes, joys and sorrows, each of these authors stakes a claim to be included among the list of canonical authors. In “Nightfall,” Arthur C Clarke writes of the effects of an atomic war, and thinks back to an earlier time. He is staking his claim to posterity when he writes:

Good freed for lesvs sake forbear,  
To dig the dvst enclosed heare  
Blest be ye man yt spares thes stones,  
And cvrst be he yt moves my bones.

Undisturbed through all eternity the poet could sleep in safety now: in the silence and darkness above his head, the Avon was seeking its new outlet to the sea.

For Sir Arthur was paying his respects to the Bard, and claiming his place in the pantheon of the great English writers.

## About the Author

Peter Ponzio, the author of *Children of the Night*, is a CPA with over 30 years experience in Corporate Finance, holding positions as divergent as Treasurer, VP of Sales Administration, Vice President of IT, and General Manager of an internet start-up company in the late 1990s, and CFO at a subsidiary of a Fortune 100 company.

Mr. Ponzio graduated with a degree in English literature from Loyola University of Chicago, and an MA in Literature from Northwestern University.

In addition to his novel, Mr. Ponzio has also published a book on goldfish entitled *Spike's Goldfish Guide*, and has written a series of articles on goldfish and koi that have appeared in many water gardening and fish-keeping magazines. A number of these articles can be found at [www.americangoldfish.org](http://www.americangoldfish.org).

Peter's website can be reached at [www.peterjponzio.com](http://www.peterjponzio.com)