

The evolution of science fiction: from proto-science fiction to new wave period

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Abstract: The following paper aims to explore the trajectory of science fiction literature, tracing its development from its foundational elements to the emergence and evolution of the cyberpunk as a subgenre of science fiction. Beginning with an examination of the origins and main features of science fiction in American literature, the paper delves into the thematic and stylistic elements that have characterized this genre over time. With roots in the speculative fiction of the early 19th century and the golden age of pulp magazines, science fiction has continually evolved alongside technological advancements and cultural shifts. From exploring space exploration and alien encounters to grappling with the ethical implications of scientific innovation, science fiction has served as a mirror to society's hopes, fears, and aspirations. The given research analyzes all stages of sci-fi development, commencing from proto-science fiction until the formation of new wave movement.

Keywords: Science fiction, genre, subgenre, technology, future world.

Introduction: The evolution of science fiction in America is a rich and dynamic narrative that mirrors the societal, cultural, and technological changes of the nation itself. From its humble beginnings in the early 19th century to its current status as a global phenomenon, science fiction has undergone several distinct stages of development, each characterized by unique themes, styles, and influences. At its inception, American science fiction emerged as a literary genre deeply intertwined with the spirit of exploration and discovery that permeated the nation's ethos. Early works, such as Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Unparalleled Adventure of One Hans Pfaall' and Washington Irving's 'The Unearthly Visitor', reflected the fascination with scientific progress and the unknown, blending elements of fantasy, adventure, and speculation. The late 19th and early 20th centuries witnessed the rise of pulp magazines and the popularization of science fiction as a form of mass entertainment. Writers like H.G. Wells and Jules Verne captured the imaginations of readers with their visionary tales of space exploration, time travel, and technological innovation. This period laid the foundation for the emergence of distinct subgenres within science fiction, including space opera, cyberpunk, and dystopian fiction. The mid-20th century, often referred to as the Golden Age

of science fiction, saw the genre reach new heights of popularity and sophistication. Influential editors like John W. Campbell Jr. and *Astounding Science Fiction* magazine played a pivotal role in shaping the direction of the genre, promoting hard science fiction and championing writers like Isaac Asimov, Arthur C. Clarke, and Robert A. Heinlein. This era was characterized by an optimism about the potential of technology to transform society and the human condition. The 1960s and 1970s brought about the New Wave of science fiction, marked by a shift towards more experimental and socially conscious storytelling. Writers like Philip K. Dick, Ursula K. Le Guin, and Harlan Ellison challenged the conventions of traditional science fiction, introducing themes of social commentary, political satire, and existential angst. This period expanded the boundaries of the genre and paved the way for a more diverse and intellectually rigorous approach to speculative literature. As we move into the late 20th century, science fiction continues to evolve and adapt to the changing landscape of society and technology. Cyberpunk became a symbol of that period of time.

DEFINING SCI-FI GENRE AND EXPLORING THE PROTO-SCIENCE FICTION LANDSCAPE

For many, science fiction is notably inclined towards depicting future scenarios. According to the respected

critic Darko Suvin, the pivotal transition of science fiction into a distinctively futuristic genre occurred approximately around 1800. During this period, the primary focus of narrative estrangement shifted from space to time, marking a significant evolution in the genre's thematic orientations (Suvin, 1990). The proto-science fiction period persisted during the 19th century. Before explaining the main elements of this period of the development of sci-fi, it is important to define this literary genre. Hamdan and Noritah (2010) mentioned that defining the genre of science fiction (SF) poses a challenge, as its boundaries are not easily delineated, yet it is generally recognized by most individuals to involve certain themes and elements.

Broderick also articulates in more precise terms the methods utilized by the majority of science fiction works: Science fiction is a genre of literature that often emerges in societies undergoing significant transformations in their modes of production, distribution, consumption, and waste management. It employs metaphors and other literary devices to convey its message, often drawing inspiration from familiar symbols and themes derived from a shared cultural heritage. Unlike traditional literature, science fiction tends to place less emphasis on character development and ornate prose, and instead prioritizes the object over the subject, much like scientific or postmodern texts (D. Broderick, 2005).

Early exploration of proto-science fiction in the 19th century mark a period of burgeoning curiosity and imagination, intertwined with the rapid technological and scientific advancements of the time. Mary Shelley's "Frankenstein" played a pivotal role during the proto-science fiction period of the 19th century. Published in 1818, it stands as one of the earliest and most influential works in the genre, blending elements of gothic horror with speculative science. Csicsery-Ronay Jr (2012) pointed out that Shelley's "Frankenstein" moves beyond its roots in Gothic literature to establish itself as a fundamental work in the realm of science fiction, providing audiences with a narrative that serves as a warning about the ethical and existential consequences associated with scientific exploration.

Another eminent masterpiece of proto-science fiction period was Edgar Allan Poe's "The Unparalleled Adventure of One Hans Pfaall". It occupies a significant position in the realm of proto-science fiction during the 19th century. Published in 1835, this short story exemplifies Poe's innovative blending of scientific speculation with elements of adventure and fantasy. Frank and Magistrare (1997) emphasized that by means of "The Unparalleled Adventure of One Hans Pfaall" Poe made a substantial contribution to the spread of space travel motifs in science fiction, leaving a lasting

impact on future writers. Through "The Unparalleled Adventure of One Hans Pfaall" Poe demonstrated an early understanding of the potential of science fiction as a means of exploring the boundaries of human knowledge and imagination (Meyers, 2000). Poe demonstrated a unique ability to combine scientific inquiry with imaginative storytelling, influencing generations of science fiction writers to come (Harrison, 1987). Poe's works represented a significant milestone in the evolution of science fiction, with its focus on scientific speculation and exploration of the unknown (Peeples, 2004). The era of Proto-Science Fiction in the 19th century stands as a crucial period in the evolution of literature, marking the beginnings of what would eventually become the science fiction genre.

THE COMMENCEMENT OF PULP ERA

The Pulp Era of science fiction, emerging predominantly in the early 1920s and extending through the 1930s, marks a pivotal period in the development of the genre. Characterized by its cheaply produced, mass-market magazines printed on rough pulp paper, this era became a breeding ground for imaginative tales that captivated audiences across the globe. According to Roberts (2016) the term "pulp" refers to a specific type of story published in specialized magazines. These stories, often written by prolific but less recognized writers, were inexpensive for publishers to acquire. One of the notable aspects of the pulp era, associated with its prominent figure in publishing, Hugo Gernsback. Gernsback aimed to establish a new form of literature based strictly on scientific and didactic principles. In other words, he sought to redefine science fiction by eliminating any mystical or magical elements from the science-mysticism interplay that had initially characterized it. Gernsback as an editor who facilitated the credibility of science fiction, asserting that this belief, rather than the literary merit of his early works, allowed his concept of a genre to flourish (Westfahl, 1998). He emphasized on the point that Gernsback not just as the originator but also as the primary theorist and chronicler of science fiction. Alternatively, Clute et al. (1993) held a negative view of Hugo Gernsback, characterizing him as "the dire weird farcical philistine". While acknowledging Gernsback's positive contribution in founding "Amazing Stories: the Magazine of Scientifiction", Clute argued that Gernsback's overall influence was overwhelmingly negative.

INNOVATION AND IMAGINATION: THE GOLDEN AGE OF SCI-FI LITERATURE

The "Golden Age" of science fiction, spanning from the

late 1930s to the early 1950s, represents a pivotal era in the genre's history, marked by a surge in popularity, creativity, and innovation. This period witnessed the emergence of iconic works, influential authors, and enduring themes that shaped the landscape of science fiction for decades to come. Referring to the science fiction (SF) literature of the 1940s and 1950s as the "Golden Age" inherently carries a subjective bias, as the term was coined by fervent enthusiasts who idealized a specific style of writing. This characterization venerates a particular subset of SF narratives characterized by elements such as hard science fiction, linear storytelling, and heroic protagonists confronting challenges in a spacefaring or technologically driven context. The golden age coincided with significant historical events, such as WWII and the beginning of the Cold War, which influenced the themes and tone of many science fiction stories. Authors explored themes of technological progress, social change, and the consequences of scientific discovery against the backdrop of a rapidly evolving world. Another perspective on defining this era could be to attribute the notion of a golden age to the personal preferences of John W. Campbell, whose influential role in promoting prescriptive notions of what SF should embody was unparalleled. Campbell favored idea-driven narratives grounded in plausible scientific concepts, featuring protagonists who tackle challenges or adversaries, narratives centered on human expansion and dominance, as well as explorations of potential technologies and their societal ramifications.. In Westfahl's concise depiction, Campbell's approach involves constructing stories as thought experiments, wherein the author meticulously formulates hypotheses about future events and allows the narrative to develop from those conjectures (Westfahl, 1998).

Prominent figures emerged as leading voices of the golden age, including Isaac Asimov, among others. These authors crafted imaginative worlds, introduced groundbreaking concepts, and challenged readers to contemplate the possibilities of the future. Isaac Asimov's contributions to the Golden Age of science fiction are profound and far-reaching, establishing him as one of the genre's most influential figures. With a career spanning over five decades, Asimov's impact on speculative literature remains unparalleled. Isaac Asimov's prolific contributions during the golden age of science fiction solidified his status as one of the genre's most influential figures, with his foundation series standing as a cornerstone of speculative literature (Gunn, 1996). Patrouch (1974) pointed out that Asimov's emphasis on scientific accuracy sometimes overshadowed character development, his exploration

of big ideas and complex ethical dilemmas left an indelible mark on the golden age and beyond. Asimov's enduring popularity and relevance attest to his enduring impact on the genre, serving as a testament to his enduring legacy in the annals of science fiction history (White, 2005). Isaac Asimov's enduring popularity and continued relevance within the realm of science fiction underscore the profound impact he has had on the genre. Through his visionary storytelling, ethical explorations, and commitment to scientific accuracy, Asimov left an indelible mark on the genre, inspiring generations of writers and readers alike. Apart from Asimov, some prominent writers of the "Golden Age" of science fiction include Arthur C. Clarke, Robert A. Heinlein, Ray Bradbury, A.E. van Vogt, John W. Campbell, Clifford D. Simak, Frederik Pohl, Theodore Sturgeon, and Leigh Brackett. Each of these authors contributed to the genre with their unique styles and imaginative storytelling, producing works that have stood the test of time and continue to inspire readers and writers alike. Their collective impact helped define the Golden Age as a period of innovation and exploration in science fiction literature. The Golden Age of science fiction represents a transformative period in the genre's evolution, characterized by prolific creativity, visionary storytelling, and a lasting impact on popular culture.

THE NEW WAVE MOVEMENT AS REDEFINING SCIENCE FICTION LANDSCAPE

The "New Wave" of science fiction, spanning from the 1960s to the 1970s, marked a period of significant experimentation and innovation within the genre. Emerging in response to the perceived limitations of traditional science fiction, the "New Wave" sought to challenge established conventions and push the boundaries of storytelling. Critics employ the term "New Wave" to characterize a loosely connected group of writers active during the 1960s and 1970s who, in various ways, rebelled against the norms of traditional science fiction, crafting avant-garde, radical, or fragmented narratives. However, such categorizations of literary movements pose challenges, and the term "New Wave" is particularly fraught with ambiguity and difficulty. The "New Wave" of science fiction marked a pivotal moment in the genre's evolution, introducing literary sophistication and thematic complexity previously unseen in sci-fi (Disch, 2000). The "New Wave" movement expanded the boundaries of science fiction by incorporating elements of surrealism, postmodernism, and experimental literature (Nicholls, Clute & Langford, 1980). The "New Wave" of science fiction, which emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, was characterized by several key features such as literary experimentation, social and political commentary,

character-driven narratives, ambiguity and open-endedness exploration of inner space, avant-garde aesthetics and influence of popular culture. Authors such as Philip K. Dick, Ursula K. Le Guin, and Harlan Ellison emerged as leading voices of the “New Wave”, each bringing their own distinctive style and perspective to the genre. Dick’s mind-bending explorations of reality and identity, Le Guin’s anthropological insights and feminist themes, and Ellison’s visceral prose and social critique all contributed to the richness and diversity of the movement. Philip K. Dick was one of prominent representative of “New Wave” movement.

Philip K. Dick’s legacy looms large within the “New Wave” period of science fiction, leaving an indelible mark on the genre with his innovative storytelling and profound exploration of philosophical and existential themes. His works challenged the conventions of traditional science fiction, ushering in a new era of speculative literature characterized by literary experimentation and thematic complexity. Dick’s ability to blend speculative concepts with deeply human concerns revolutionized the genre, introducing a new level of emotional depth and existential inquiry to science fiction storytelling (Carrère, 2004). Palmer (2003) noted that through his groundbreaking novels and short stories, Dick challenged the conventions of science fiction and paved the way for a more intellectually rigorous and philosophically rich approach to speculative literature. Dick’s novels, such as “Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?”, “The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch”, and “Ubik”, introduced readers to dystopian worlds inhabited by morally ambiguous characters grappling with questions of identity, reality, and the nature of consciousness. His narratives often blurred the lines between the real and the imagined, inviting readers to ponder the nature of perception and the elusive nature of truth. Moreover, Dick’s exploration of social and political issues, including authoritarianism, surveillance, and the dehumanizing effects of technology, resonated deeply with the cultural zeitgeist of the 1960s and 1970s. His work served as a mirror reflecting the anxieties and uncertainties of the era, while also offering a critique of contemporary society. Dick’s unique blend of speculative imagination, philosophical inquiry, and psychological insight helped redefine the possibilities of the genre, leaving an enduring legacy that continues to shape the landscape of science fiction literature to this day. Although the New Wave eventually waned by the late 1970s, its legacy endured, influencing subsequent generations of writers and shaping the evolution of science fiction as a genre.

CONCLUSION

During the research of the topic, the following conclusions were revealed. This paper first analyzed the phenomenon of science fiction in world literature. Moreover, we explored scholars’ standpoints regarding to the nature of science fiction and their interpretations of the definition of the sci-fi genre. At its core, science fiction serves as a speculative platform for exploring the intersections of science, technology, and society. It encompasses narratives that project potential futures, alternate realities, and imaginative scenarios rooted in scientific progressions and societal shifts.

Thereafter, we commenced to depict all the stages of development of sci-fi. The era of “Proto-Science Fiction” in the 19th century emerges as a foundational period that laid the groundwork for the rich tapestry of the science fiction genre. Through the pioneering works of writers like Mary Shelley and Edgar Allan Poe, themes of scientific exploration, ethical dilemmas, and the limitless possibilities of human imagination began to take shape. The works of this period of time challenged conventional notions of humanity, morality, and the boundaries of knowledge, inspiring subsequent generations of authors to push the boundaries of imagination even further.

Afterward, we emphasized on the formation of pulp fiction. The “Pulp Era” of science fiction stands as a transformative period that reshaped the genre and laid the groundwork for its enduring popularity. Central to the “Pulp Era” was the visual element, with colorful and vibrant cover art becoming synonymous with the genre. These illustrations, though varying in skill level, played a crucial role in capturing the imagination of readers and establishing a distinct visual style that continues to influence science fiction aesthetics. At the forefront of this era was Hugo Gernsback, a figure whose vision and editorial efforts helped define the parameters of science fiction literature. The legacy of the “Pulp Era” endures in the rich tapestry of science fiction literature, serving as a testament to the enduring power of imagination and storytelling.

We also delineated the “Golden Age” period of science fiction. The “Golden Age” of science fiction stands as a watershed moment in the genre’s history, defined by a surge of creativity, innovation, and lasting impact. Spanning from the late 1930s to the early 1950s, this era witnessed the emergence of iconic works, influential authors, and enduring themes that continue to shape the landscape of speculative literature. Prominent figures like Isaac Asimov, Arthur C. Clarke, and Ray Bradbury emerged as leading voices of this era, crafting imaginative worlds, introducing groundbreaking concepts, and challenging readers to contemplate the possibilities of the future. Asimov, in

particular, left an indelible mark with his Foundation series, which explored grand ideas and ethical dilemmas on a galactic scale. The “Golden Age” of science fiction represents a transformative period that propelled the genre into the mainstream, solidifying its place in popular culture and laying the groundwork for the diverse and vibrant landscape of speculative literature that thrives to this day.

Then, we concentrate our attention on the development of “New Wave” movement. The “New Wave” of science fiction, spanning from the 1960s to the 1970s, represented a transformative period marked by experimentation, innovation, and the challenging of established conventions. Emerging in response to perceived limitations within the genre, the “New Wave” sought to push the boundaries of storytelling, introducing literary sophistication and thematic complexity previously unseen in science fiction. Through groundbreaking novels like “Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?” and “The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch” Dick invited readers to ponder existential questions while navigating dystopian worlds fraught with moral ambiguity. His exploration of social and political issues resonated deeply with the cultural zeitgeist of the era, offering a critique of contemporary society while pushing the boundaries of speculative literature. Although the “New Wave” eventually waned by the late 1970s, its legacy endured, influencing subsequent generations of writers and shaping the evolution of science fiction as a genre.

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