

Darshan Krishnaswamy

Ms. Small

Humanities - L Section

20 May 2020

Science Fiction: Always Changing, Yet Always the Same.

Although it was only popularized in the 1800s, science fiction has become one of the most popular genres of fiction. The main purpose behind most science fiction books and stories is to warn people of the potentially dangerous impacts of dramatic technological advancements and excessive war. Some examples of science fiction pieces are Alfred Bester's "Adam and No Eve," Philip K. Dick's "Second Variety," and John Crowley's "Snow," and the topics that these three works discuss are primarily based on the advancements in technology and the historical contexts of their time. Despite the fact that science fiction pieces are often predictions of the future, their topics and themes tend to evolve over time, reflecting the scientific, technological, and historical conditions of the time period in which they are written; however, works of science fiction possess the same primary purpose: to warn people of the potential dangers that may arise from excessive human pride and carelessness towards science and technology.

Alfred Bester's "Adam and No Eve" is one example of a science fiction piece that uses the technologies and events of its time, specifically the development of nuclear weapons and rocketry, to urge people to be careful with new technologies. The short story was written in the early 1940s, as World War II was well underway and multiple countries had begun nuclear bomb development. In the story, when the narrator Krane tells his assistant Hallmyer that he plans on using his new iron-disintegrating catalyst for his rocket, Hallmyer responds, "Do you realize

what it'll do if a drop hits the Earth? It'll start a chain of disintegration that'll envelop the globe" (Bester 908). This response about Hallmyer's fears of the destruction of the Earth reflects the concerns that many people in the 1940s had about the development of the nuclear bomb. Nuclear technologies were new at the time, and as a result, a great deal of uncertainty existed around their potential side effects. People feared that if a nuclear weapon was used in a war, it could lead to a wide-scale nuclear war, potentially destroying the Earth and all life. In addition to nuclear technologies, rocketry and space travel were also new technological fields, and many were concerned about their potential impacts on people's safety, an idea that was also reflected in Bester's short story. Although rockets are currently primarily used for space exploration and scientific discoveries, in the 1940s, the primary purpose of their development was to improve the effectiveness of weapons in warfare. During World War II, the use of long-range rockets and missiles in warfare greatly increased, and countries involved in the war, especially the United States, the Soviet Union, and Germany, started looking into using rockets as a means to launch these weapons. For example, Germany was developing V-1 rockets, commonly referred to as "flying bombs," which were missiles that could travel up to 150 miles and carried an 1870-pound warhead (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2019). This use of rockets, in combination with nuclear weapons, could be catastrophic in a war and could lead to widespread destruction. At the end of Bester's short story, Krane ignores Hallmyer's warning and uses his rocket with the catalyst, believing that the benefits that it would bring were worth the risk of the Earth's destruction. Although he had good intentions, his prediction is incorrect, and some of the catalyst leaks from the rocket, completely destroying the Earth and everyone living on it. This is symbolic of the destruction of the Earth as a result of nuclear weapons, a fear possessed by many people at the

time, through its demonstration that the careless use of these nuclear technologies can easily lead to the complete annihilation of the planet, and that even though people may have good intentions with these technologies, they can easily backfire and make the situation even worse. Bester uses this to demonstrate that with power comes responsibility. He suggests that the creation of nuclear weapons and rockets would lead to increased power for the countries and governments involved in their development, but if the people do not use this power responsibly, then their carelessness can easily lead to destructive results. Through his descriptions of the destruction of the Earth by nuclear technologies and rocketry, Bester uses the technological and historical context of his time to warn people about the potential dangers that may arise from excessive human pride and carelessness in the use of new technologies.

Philip K. Dick's short story "Second Variety" also utilizes technological advancements and historical events, particularly nuclear weaponry and the Cold War, to emphasize the importance of caution when dealing with science and technology. The piece was written in the 1950s, while the US and the Soviet Union were in the middle of the Cold War. The first nuclear bomb had recently been dropped during World War II, and the United States and the Soviet Union were in the process of building up nuclear arsenals. This was a time of extreme anxiety for people across the world because as tensions rose between two superpower countries that were building up nuclear weapons to threaten each other, people feared that any incident could lead to the threat of a wide scale nuclear war. Additionally, around this time, computers, robots, and artificial intelligence were becoming increasingly popular. In the story, without the active presence of UN troops on the Earth to take care of them, the claws continually improve themselves, become increasingly destructive, and begin to disguise themselves as humans.

Finally, at the end of the story, the protagonist, Hendricks, helps a woman escape to the Moon Base, and later realizes that she was one of the claws and "because of him, she was on her way to the moon, to the Moon Base" (Dick 331). Dick uses this apocalyptic world to highlight the fact that if humans develop artificially intelligent robots, they might not be able to properly control these machines, leading to disastrous results. The humans in the story developed the claws without considering the possibility that these claws would eventually enhance themselves further, and as a result, the claws take over the planet and start attacking their creators, and eventually even each other. Through this description, Dick develops the idea that humans must be careful with the technologies that they create, and must always think about the potential impacts of these technologies ahead of time before it is too late. Additionally, Dick uses the historical context of the Cold War to highlight the destructive capabilities of nuclear weapons and the importance of handling them responsibly. He describes how after the Soviets had bombed Europe and North America, "nothing could be planted. No one could live" and he makes it clear that the weapons used were nuclear by describing how the Soviets "wore the first really effective anti-radiation equipment" (Dick 301). This depiction reflected many people's concerns at the time about the possibility of a wide-scale and destructive nuclear war. The destruction described by Dick occurred on a much larger scale than in any prior war, as the nuclear weapons had completely obliterated entire populations of people, and Dick utilizes this to highlight just how destructive these technologies can be. He uses this description as a warning that humans must exercise extreme caution with such powerful weapons and technologies, because a nuclear war such as the one described could easily wipe out the entire human population, which is not something that either side of the war would desire. Through his use of references to the different

technologies emerging at his time, particularly the nuclear bomb, along with the historical context of the Cold War, Dick develops the idea that humans must be careful and responsible with new and potentially destructive technologies.

In his short story "Snow," John Crowley uses a technological invention of his time, the camera, to warn people of the potential dangers that result from the careless use of technology. "Snow" was written in 1985, a time when the digital camera had just been released ten years ago and was gaining popularity (Trenholm). At the end of the story, the narrator states that he "never went back" to The Park and that the only type of memory that doesn't worsen is "the kind you stumble into as into rooms with secret doors," (Crowley 13). He decides that he prefers these types of memories to those which are recorded or remembered vividly. Although the narrator initially believes that visiting The Park will provide him with positive memories of his time with Georgie, he soon realizes that recorded videos of his memories are not what he truly desires. Rather, he prefers the important memories from his life that come to his mind naturally, because he is able to experience these memories all over again in his mind, which provides him with a more satisfying experience than merely viewing them on a screen, which provides a more superficial recollection of the memories. Crowley uses the narrator's epiphany to develop the theme that people should live in the moment and truly enjoy their experiences around them, which will allow them to be able to experience these memories again in a much more enjoyable way, rather than record all the events on a camera, which can never provide the same level of detail that one can receive from savoring the moment. He also describes how if one enjoys their experiences, then these memories will stay with the person for the rest of their lives in the same quality, but if they record and store them on a camera such as the Wasp, these memories will

begin to fade away and decrease in quality. By describing how memories recalled through a camera are never experienced as genuinely as those remembered naturally, Crowley warns the reader that the excessive use of cameras as a means of storing memories can be dangerous, because memories stored on cameras are not as authentic as those remembered naturally, and if people become overly dependent on memories from these devices, then they would lose access to their true and authentic memories. Through his depiction of how photos and videos taken on a camera should not be used as replacements for people's memories, Crowley uses the emerging technologies of his time to develop the overall theme that people should be careful with their use of technology, because the excessive and careless use of these devices could potentially lead to destructive impacts on human behavior and society.

Throughout the history of science fiction, the topics discussed in the different stories have evolved in order to reflect the current popular technologies of the time. However, a commonality in many of these stories is that they all serve the same main purpose: to warn people about the potential dangers of technology and to urge people to be cautious with their use of technology, especially devices with the power to destroy entire societies and civilizations. Often, these dangers are related to warfare and weapons technologies, such as nuclear weapons and weaponized robots, but they can also be even simple technologies such as cameras, which can corrupt people's memories and cause them to lose track of their true authentic memories. By understanding the potential impacts of emerging technologies, people can ensure that humanity does not go down the wrong path and help prevent an apocalyptic world where humanity ends up completely destroyed, both physically and socially.

Works Cited

- The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica. "V-1 Missile." *Encyclopædia Britannica*,
Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 19 Sept. 2019,
www.britannica.com/technology/V-1-missile.
- Trenholm, Richard. "Photos: The History of the Digital Camera." *CNET*,
www.cnet.com/news/photos-the-history-of-the-digital-camera/.