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Science Fiction as Literary Artifact

An artifact is any tool, clothing, art, food, or other object that represents a group of people from a time or place which represent the culture it came from (National Geographic Society). Artifacts exist in many junctures of time, from the moment they were made until they are potentially in ruins, and represent the different beliefs, values, practices, religions, and histories from the past (Global Oneness Project LLC). Literature, a form of art and therefore an artifact, “serve particularly well for insight into common opinions and attitudes, everyday life in the streets, in houses, apartments, and hovels (Pasco 373).” Literary artifacts are represented through the authors representations, as well as the treatment by different characters, of certain identity groups within W. E. B. Du Bois’ *The Comet* (1920), Judith Merril’s *That Only a Mother* (1948), and Mac Reynolds with Dean Ing’s *Trojan Orbit* (1985).

I. *The Comet*

W. E. B. Du Bois, who lived from 1868 to 1963, was an author, editor, sociologist, historian, and Black rights activist (Rudwick). He wrote *The Comet*, a short story, in 1920, which is an apocalyptic tale that follows two survivors of a toxic glass cloud unleashed on New York City by a passing comet. The characters, a Black working man named Jim Davis and a rich White woman named Julia, work together to find other survivors, especially those known to them, while confronting their differences.

Du Bois uses his short story to preset the prejudices Jim is constantly confronted with. “Few ever noticed him save in a way that stung. He was outside the world-‘nothing!’ (Du Bois 53)” He was given tasks “too dangerous for more valuable men. (53)” In the 1920’s, Black Americans were primarily only able to work low paying and unskilled jobs (BBC 1). While searching for survivors, he goes to a restaurant to get some food left on trays by those who died in the middle of a meal. He mentions the restaurant would have refused to serve him prior to the apocalyptic event (Du Bois 56). He continues his search and comes across Julia screaming at him for help out of a window, where shortly after Julia is surprised, “of all the sorts of men she had pictured as coming to her rescue she had not dreamed of one like him,” and Jim again remembers very recent transgressions against him that “yesterday, he thought with bitterness, she would scarcely have looked at him twice. (56)” The pair continue their journey on through the city, getting to know more about each other, and looking for additional survivors.

In the end, the two begin to come to terms with “how foolish our human distinctions seem-now. (59)” The disaster has made them the same, not exactly, but leveled them as Jim puts it (60). This breakthrough will not come to fruition, though, as a group of survivors find them. Julia’s fiancé, Fred, along with her father, is with a group of survivors. Fred immediately assesses Jim to be a threat based on the color of his skin and assumes he must have had his way with Julia, who while unable to make eye contact with Jim, reports that he in fact saved her (61). Social customs of the time required Black people to not look a White person in the eye, and to speak only when spoken to (BBC 1). The crowd that comes up the elevator also assumes the worst of

Jim, even threatening to lynch him, to be killed by hanging (BBC 4), but again someone speaks up that all he has done is save Julia, which the group somehow still finds offense with his actions because, “Saved hell! He had no business. (Du Bois 61)“ Du Bois provides literal examples in *The Comet* of the treatment, stereotypes, and conditions of Black Americans living in the United States during the 1920’s.

II. *That Only a Mother*

Judith Merril, born 1923 and who died in 1997, was an author and editor, well known for being one of the first female authors to publish under an obviously female name (Csicsery-Ronay Jr., Evans and Gordon 211). Her science fiction short story *That Only a Mother* speculates on the effects of radiation in a post nuclear age on the family household of a working mother, Margaret, her husband Hank, a nuclear scientist, and their premature, not quite normal newborn daughter, Henriette.

Merril shows the changing opinion, albeit temporarily, Americans had during the 1940’s of women holding jobs in the workforce, especially those normally held by men. Margaret, or Maggie for short, is a woman in the short story who is well into pregnancy and still holds a job that she walks six blocks to every morning because “you didn’t just stop working these days. Everyone who could do anything at all was needed. (Merril 214)” Prior to the 1940’s, other than in lower working class families, most women were expected to have a job inside of the home doing the cooking, cleaning, laundry, chores, and raising of children, a view of most men and women too, but during World War II many woman had to fill the jobs opened by the vast numbers of men leaving to go to war (Walker).

Another representation in the book of the culture at the time is the necessity of the mothers to protect their children from the fathers. Maggie is constantly worried that Hank's job, and his potential risk to radiation exposure, will harm their baby (Merril 213). When talking about the growing number of infanticides due to the increasing number of newborns born with mutations, Maggie says, "It's the fathers who do it. Lucky thing you're not around, in case - (114)" She also mentions the lack of courts willing to convict fathers, which parallels the attitude at the time in regard to domestic violence within families. While there is little data in the way of infanticide or abortion in the 1940's due to the necessity of having to hide the illegal act to avoid prosecution (Greenhouse and Siegel), domestic violence was not considered anything more than a private family matter all the way through the 1970's (National Library of Medicine), and a court would be unlikely to get involved if this had been the case at the time. While the example of protecting a mutilated infant is not a direct draw from society at the time, this fear from a husband was present in American culture at the time of writing this story and represents a motif women of the day felt and experienced.

III. *Trojan Orbit*

Dallas McCord Reynolds, 1917 to 1983, also known as Mack Reynolds and who wrote under many other pen names, including Bob Belmont, Clark Collins, Todd Harding, Mark Mallory, Guy McCord, Maxine Reynolds, Dallas Rose, and Dallas Ross, was a science fiction author who primarily wrote on socioeconomic speculation (Wasatch County Library). His book *Trojan* Orbit is a science fiction book that draws influence from Cold War fears and organized crime themes as it follows a group of characters on a space colony, each with their own reasons and motives for being there,

as they uncover a crime syndicate lying to the entire world. Mack Reynolds passed away two years prior to the publication of this book, and Dean Ing was commissioned to finish several novels, including *Trojan Orbit*, after Reynolds became ill and was unable to finish them past the draft stage (Reynolds and Ing).

An artifact within *Trojan Orbit* is the representation of gender roles that men and woman have. In Reynold's book, women are represented and treated by many of the characters as being less important than men in terms of the space colonies primary operations, and only present on the colony for the benefit and pleasure of men doing the real work. According to one character, Jeff, a space engineer complaining about the living conditions in the colony's mining outpost on the moon:

> "What about broads? Are you going to have two hundred men up here for periods of at least a year or eighteen months at a stretch, as the egg-head saw it, without any kind of relaxation? You know what happens to guys who are locked up without mopsies in prison or in concentration camps, or labor camps like in Siberia? ... You'd better have at least ten broads up here, willing and able to put out. Maybe some of them could double as waitresses and so forth in the reception hall, but they'd have to be available for getting laid when a man wanted some nooky. (Reynolds and Ing 126)"

Many indications of this are also present as superfluous dialogue of the characters reducing the women to their appearance, such as "pert-looking office girl" who "tinkled at him" and "flapped eyelashes at Bruce" (148), "a gorgeous blond (160)", I say, what a beautiful woman (162)", and "one of the inevitably cute waitresses. (215)" This language serves no purpose other than to objectify the woman they are referencing and reduce

the achievements of her to less than if she was a man as she is assumed to be “lacking in both mental and moral capacity, and as a result, they are seen as less competent, less human. (Blake, Brooks and Kellie)”

In the time the book was written, men were expected to be the head of the house and money maker for the family, and the woman’s role was to be submissive to the man, take care of the household, and “facilitate consumption. (Ferber)” This is represented in the book when the character Bruce, an author, is jokingly warning a visiting Arab prince against asking a woman who does not fit this expectation as, “she’d have it in an uproar before the first day was out. Women’s rights and all, (Reynolds and Ing 162)”. The jobs women were expected to fill in the colony are also an example of dated gender roles, such as shown when the character Jeff says, “many women can’t do anything but white-collar jobs, medical jobs such as nursing, or maybe restaurant work. And when they’re pregnant, or the baby’s small, they can’t even do that. (Wasatch County Library 130)” Other than a handful of female scientists on the space station, women were not expected to fill vital or mission oriented duties for the company.

A third example within *Trojan Orbit* that is an artifact of the times it was written is the stereotypes of individuals from third world nations as the book puts it, also a Cold War reference to the nations that were not aligned with the western NATO countries nor the eastern socialist and communist countries, but became an insult to describe poorer nations (Silver). A passing character, Bob, debating some other characters about the lack of qualified workers to hire from Earth for the space colony, mentions a trending downward birth rate in most countries. He says that the countries that do have an upwards birthrate, India, Indonesia, Africa, and Latin America, “underdeveloped areas”

as he puts it, do not have the people they need due to having bad health, poor education, and a lower than normal I.Q., for one reason or another (Wasatch County Library 174), not fit for the educated, experienced needs of the company.

Many of the characters within the novel have the outlook that times have changed, such as Doctor Ryan, the scientist who thought up the space station colony idea, when he says, “’Here in space there are no formalities. We are peers without qualifications regarding race, creed, color, class, title, rank….’ He looked at Annette, smiled his little rueful smile and added, “…or sex.”, but this hint of remaining sexism that exists in their world shows that there are still stereotypes, gender roles, and expectations of the past that need to be recognized and worked towards, similar to that of the late 1970’s and early 1980’s when the novel was written. Times were changing, but they hadn’t yet changed (Ferber).

IV. Conclusion

There are other examples of cultural artifacts within these stores. Technology, for example, the “computer” that is still really just for calculations and the fax machine, assumed to be in every household, for the printing of the daily news (Merril), or the author visiting a space station who still relies upon a typewriter to create his written work (Reynolds and Ing 126), as well as the desks covered with and filling cabinets still stuffed full of physical paper and books needed for their research (Reynolds and Ing 148, 314). It is also obvious in the names of the prominent companies in their times, such as Stutz (Du Bois 57), Rockwell International, Johns-Manville, McDonnell Douglass, Grumman, Chrysler, Rocketdyne, Dornier, VFW-Fokker (Reynolds and Ing

298), IBM, Dupont (344), Krupp (345), many of which are still companies around today, but are no longer household names spoken regularly at the dinner table.

Language is also a unique trait which helps pinpoint the era and cultures the work derived from. Examples may come from slang terms, such as “romp” to mean heist (Reynolds and Ing 46), “flog” to mean sell (47), “what spins?” as a greeting (65), or such a common response of the time such as “Wizard” to express excitement or surprise that almost seems absurd in the regularity of its use (43, 53, 67, 123, 129-131, 143, 155, 164, 183, 194, 201-202, 233, 257, 259, 261, 263, 266, 275, 283, 286, 290, 292, 301, 311-312, 321, 351, 356). Words at the time that by today’s standards would be considered derogatory and socially unacceptable, such as “retarded” (Merril 217), “negro” (Du Bois 56, 61) but were not meant to be as insulting in the time, except for of course a similar “n” word that was very derogatory in 1920’s (61), or accusations that were much more of an insult at the time such as “you sound like a goddamned commie (Reynolds and Ing 300).”

Literature is a form of art, and art is an artifact which represents the culture, society, stereotypes, religions, and classes of its time (Global Oneness Project LLC). W. E. B. Du Bois represented life of a Black American man in New York City during the 1920’s and part of the challenges they faced. Judith Merril presented a typical 1940’s family structure and postulated what it would look like in the 1950’s post nuclear world in *That Only a Mother*. Mack Reynolds’ characters in *Trojan Orbit* are representations of the different groups and mentalities of those of the Cold War 1980’s. These three literary works are artifacts of the culture, people, and places at the time they were written, permanently recorded through the author’s writing, narration, and characters.

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