

Abstract

The goal of this thesis is to trace the roots of British science fiction literature and examine the evolution of the genre, noting the recurring themes, tropes and overall legacy of the canonical works of British sci-fi in contemporary literature. It also contains an analysis of the specifically British nature, pessimistic and featuring passive characters, especially in comparison to the natural counterpart that is American SF, which shows more optimistic tone, empowered human characters. Defining science fiction literature is complicated on its own, and it is therefore one of main issues tackled in this thesis. It is presented in the first chapter, focusing particularly on definitions proposed by Robert A. Heinlein, Darko Suvin, Brian Aldiss and Robert Scholes. These multiple, more or less conflicting definitions are argued to demonstrate the diversity of the subgenres of science fiction, thus exploring the genre's boundaries as they apply today.

The second chapter considers works arguably identified as the first exemplary novels of the genre. The authors from pre-Victorian period mentioned include Lucian of Samosa, Jonathan Swift and Francis Godwin and their theological and satirical works are analysed in science fiction context. The second part of this chapter explores the shift that came with the Victorian period, as the interest in science rose. Representative works of E. A. Abbott, Mary Shelley, Edward Bulwer-Lytton, Samuel Butler and finally, H. G. Wells, are explored in terms of their inclusion of and attitude towards science as well as what differs them from proper science fiction, not yet established as a genre at the time of their publishing.

The third chapter is dedicated to the final emergence of science fiction as a distinct and independent genre around 1926. It presents a selection of British SF writers who produced the key works of 20th century British science fiction literature both in terms of recognition they received and of the objective contribution to the genre. Therefore, it contains sections on the iconic figures of George Orwell and Aldous Huxley as well as sections on the

contemporary authors Ken MacLeod and Adam Roberts, who have not reached the same level of fame and recognition, yet their works are highly acclaimed in SF circles. The works of each of the authors are examined in context of science fiction subgenres, the general themes and topics employed as well as their overall role in the development of science fiction literature.

The fourth chapter has a broader focus – it investigates the use of science fiction as means of political speculation. Firstly, it points out the thin boundary between science fiction and political fiction and the contributing speculative element of SF. Secondly, utopian and dystopian subgenre are explored as the most apparent manifestation of political subtext in the genre, utilizing June Deery's typology. And thirdly, it observes the ways in which political speculation is employed in exemplary works of Jonathan Swift and Ken MacLeod, proving political content is not limited only to dedicated subgenres.

The fifth chapter analyses other major subgenres of British science fiction literature, including time travel, alternate history and social science fiction, while the last one is argued to be at some level present in most classic British science fiction works, independently on the main subgenre the work represents (e.g. a time travel novel with social SF content). This is revealed to a major aspect differentiating British writing from American and subsequently presenting itself in ways that were discussed in the introduction. The final chapter then concludes the work by summarizing the findings and using exemplary works of contemporary British science fiction (published since 2000) to underline the lasting relevance of the explored works and further expected development.