

The image of women in science fiction

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Science fiction is *What If* literature. All sorts of definitions have been proposed by people in the field, but they all contain both The What If and The Serious Explanation; that is, science fiction shows things not as they characteristically or habitually are but as they might be, and for this "might be" the author must offer a rational, serious, consistent explanation, one that does not (in Samuel Delany's phrase) offend against what is known to be known.¹ Science fiction writers can't be experts in all disciplines, but they ought at least to be up to the level of the *New York Times* Sunday science page. If the author offers marvels and does not explain them, or if he explains them playfully and not seriously, or if the explanation offends against what the author knows to be true, you are dealing with fantasy and not science fiction. True, the fields tend to blur into each other and the borderland is a pleasant and gleeful place, but generally you can tell where you are. Examples:

J. R. R. Tolkien writes fantasy. He offends against all sorts of archaeological, geological, paleontological, and linguistic evidence which he undoubtedly knows as well as anyone else does.

Edgar Rice Burroughs wrote science fiction. He explained his marvels seriously and he explained them as well as he could. At the time he wrote, his stories did in fact conflict with what was known to be known, but he didn't know that. He wrote *bad* science fiction.

Ray Bradbury writes both science fiction and fantasy, often in the same story. He doesn't seem to care.

Science fiction comprises a grand variety of common properties: the fourth dimension, hyperspace (whatever that is), the colonization of other worlds, nuclear catastrophe, time travel (now out of fashion), interstellar exploration, mutated supermen, alien races, and so on. The sciences treated range from the "hard" or exact sciences (astronomy, physics) through the life sciences (biology, biochemistry, neurology) through the "soft" or inexact sciences (ethology, ecology) to disciplines that are still in the descriptive or philosophical stage and may never become exact (history, for example).² I would go beyond these last to include what some writers call "para-sciences"—extra-sensory perception, psionics,

or even magic—as long as the “discipline” in question is treated as it would have to be if it were real, that is rigorously, logically, and in detail.³

Fantasy, says Samuel Delany, treats what cannot happen, science fiction what has not happened.⁴ One would think science fiction the perfect literary mode in which to explore (and explode) our assumptions about “innate” values and “natural” social arrangements, in short our ideas about Human Nature, Which Never Changes. Some of this has been done. But speculation about the innate personality differences between men and women, about family structure, about sex, in short about gender roles, hardly exists. And why not?

What is the image of women in science fiction?

We can begin by dismissing fiction set in the very near future (such as *On the Beach*) for most science fiction is not like this; most science fiction is set far in the future, some of it very far in the future, hundreds of thousands of years sometimes. One would think that by then human society, family life, personal relations, child-rearing, in fact anything one can name, would have altered beyond recognition. This is not the case. The more intelligent, literate fiction carries today's values and standards into its future Galactic Empires. What may politely be called the less sophisticated fiction returns to the past—not even a real past, in most cases, but an idealized and exaggerated past.⁵

Intergalactic suburbia

In general, the authors who write reasonably sophisticated and literate science fiction (Clarke, Asimov, for choice) see the relations between the sexes as those of present-day, white, middle-class suburbia. Mummy and Daddy may live inside a huge amoeba and Daddy's job may be to test psychedelic drugs or cultivate yeast-vats, but the world inside their heads is the world of Westport and Rahway and *that world is never questioned*. Not that the authors are obvious about it; Fred Pohl's recent satire, *The Age of the Pussyfoot*, is a good case in point.⁶ In this witty and imaginative future world, death is reversible, production is completely automated, the world population is enormous, robots do most of the repetitive work, the pharmacopoeia of psychoactive drugs is very, very large, and society has become so complicated that people must carry personal computers to make their everyday decisions for them. I haven't even mentioned the change in people's clothing, in their jobs, their slang, their hobbies, and so on. But if you look more closely at this weird world you find that it practices a laissez-faire capitalism, one even freer than our own; that men make more money than women; that men have the better jobs (the book's heroine is the equivalent of a consumer-research guinea pig); and that children are raised at home by their mothers.

In short, the American middle class with a little window dressing.

In science fiction, speculation about social institutions and individual psychology has always lagged far behind speculation about technology, possibly because technology

is easier to understand than people. But this is not the whole story.⁷ I have been talking about intelligent, literate science fiction. Concerning this sort of work one might simply speak of a failure of imagination outside the exact sciences, but there are other kinds of science fiction, and when you look at them, something turns up that makes you wonder if failure of imagination is what is at fault.

I ought to make it dear here that American science fiction and British science fiction have evolved very differently and that what I am going to talk about is—in origin—an American phenomenon. In Britain science fiction not only was always respectable, it still is, and there is a continuity in the field that the American tradition does not have. British fiction is not, on the whole, better written than American science fiction but it continues to attract first-rate writers from outside the field (Kipling, Shaw, C. S. Lewis, Orwell, Golding) and it continues to be reviewed seriously and well.⁸

American science fiction developed out of the pulps and stayed outside the tradition of serious literature for at least three decades; it is still not really respectable.⁹ American science fiction originated in the adventure-story-cum-fairy-tale which most people think of (erroneously) as "science fiction." It has been called a great many things, most of them uncomplimentary, but the usual name is "space opera". There are good writers working in this field who do not deserve the public notoriety bred by this kind of science fiction. But their values usually belong to the same imaginative world and they participate in many of the same assumptions.¹⁰ I will not, therefore, name names, but will pick on something inoffensive—think of Flash Gordon and read on.

Down among the he-men

If most literate science fiction takes for its gender-role models the ones which actually exist (or are assumed as ideals) in middle-class America, space opera returns to the past for its models, and not even the real past, but an idealized and simplified one. These stories are not realistic. They are primitive, sometimes bizarre, and often magnificently bald in their fantasy. Some common themes:

A feudal economic and social structure—usually paired with advanced technology and inadequate to the complexities of a seventh-century European mud hut.

Women are important as prizes or motives—i.e. we must rescue the heroine or win the hand of the beautiful Princess. Many fairy-tale motifs turn up here.

Active or ambitious women are evil—this literature is chockfull of cruel dowager empresses, sadistic matriarchs, evil ladies maddened by jealousy, domineering villainesses, and so on.

Women are supernaturally beautiful—all of them.

Women are weak and/or kept off stage—this genre is full of scientists' beautiful daughters who know just enough to be brought along by Daddy as his research assistant, but not enough to be of any help to anyone.

Women's powers are passive and involuntary—an odd idea that turns up again and again, not only in space opera. If female characters are given abilities, these are often innate abilities which cannot be developed or controlled, e.g. clairvoyance, telepathy, hysterical strength, unconscious psi power, eidetic memory, perfect pitch, lightning calculation, or (more baldly) magic. The power is somehow *in* the woman, but she does not really possess it. Often realistic science fiction employs the same device.¹¹

The real focus of interest is not on women at all—but on the cosmic rivalries between strong, rugged, virile he-men. It is no accident that space opera and horse opera bear similar names.¹² Most of the readers of science fiction are male and most of them are young; people seem to quit reading the stuff in their middle twenties and the hard-core readers who form fan clubs and go to conventions are even younger and even more likely to be male.¹³ Such readers as I have met (the addicts?) are overwhelmingly likely to be nervous, shy, pleasant boys, sensitive, intelligent, and very awkward with people. They also talk too much. It does not take a clairvoyant to see why such people would be attracted to space opera, with its absence of real women and its tremendous over-rating of the "real he-man." In the March 1969 issue of *Amazing* one James Koval wrote to the editor as follows:¹⁴

Your October issue was superb; better than that, it was uniquely original . . . Why do I think it so worthy of such compliments? Because of the short stories *Conqueror* and *Mu Panther*, mainly. They were, in every visual and emotional sense, stories about real men whose rugged actions and keen thinking bring back a genuine feeling of masculinity, a thing sorely missed by the long-haired and soft-eyed generation of my time, of which I am a part . . . aiming entertainment at the virile and imaginative male of today is the best kind of business . . . I sincerely hope you keep your man-versus-animal type format going, especially with stories like *Mu Panther*. That was exceptionally unique.

The editor's response was "GROAN!"

But even if readers are adolescents, the writers are not. I know quite a few grown-up men who should know better, but who nonetheless fall into what I would like to call the he-man ethic. And they do it over and over again. In November 1968, a speaker at the Philadelphia Science Fiction Convention¹⁵ described the heroes such writers create:

The only real He-Man is Master of the Universe . . . The real He-Man is invulnerable. He has no weaknesses. Sexually he is super-potent. He does exactly what he pleases, everywhere and at all times. He is absolutely self-sufficient. He depends on nobody, for this would be a weakness. Toward women he is possessive, protective, and patronizing; to men he gives orders. He is never frightened by anything or for any reason; he is never indecisive and he always wins.

In short, masculinity equals power and femininity equals powerlessness. This is a cultural stereotype that can be found in much popular literature, but science fiction writers have no business employing stereotypes, let alone swallowing them goggle-eyed.

Equal is as equal does

In the last decade or so, science fiction has begun to attempt the serious presentation of men and women as equals, usually by showing them at work together. Even a popular television show like *Star Trek* shows a spaceship with a mixed crew; fifteen years ago this was unthinkable.¹⁶ *Forbidden Planet*, a witty and charming film made in the 1950s, takes it for granted that the crew of a spaceship will all be red-blooded, crew-cut, woman-hungry men, rather like the cast of *South Pacific* before the nurses arrive. And within the memory of living adolescent, John W. Campbell, Jr., the editor of *Analog*, proposed that "nice girls" be sent on spaceships as prostitutes because married women would only clutter everything up with washing and babies. But Campbell is a coelacanth.

At any rate, many recent stories do show a two-sexed world in which women as well as men work competently and well. But this is a reflection of present reality, not genuine speculation. And what is most striking about these stories is what they leave out: the characters' personal and erotic relations are not described; child-rearing arrangements (to my knowledge) are never described; and the women who appear in these stories are either young and childless or middle-aged, with their children safely grown up. That is, the real problems of a society without gender-role differentiation are not faced. It is my impression that most of these stories are colorless and schematic; the authors want to be progressive, God bless them, but they don't know how. Exceptions:

Mack Reynolds, who also presents a version of future socialism called "the Ultra-Welfare State." (Is there a connection?) He has written novels about two-sexed societies of which one is a kind of mild gynocracy. He does not describe child-rearing arrangements, though.

Samuel Delany, who often depicts group marriages and communal child-rearing, "triplet" marriages (not polygamy or polyandry, for each person is understood to have sexual relations with the other two) and so weiter, all with no differentiation of gender roles, all with an affectionate, East Village, Berkeley-Bohemian air to them, and all with the advanced technology that would make such things work. His people have the rare virtue of fitting the institutions under which they live. Robert Heinlein, who also goes in for odd arrangements (e.g. the "line marriage" in *The Moon Is a Harsh Mistress* in which everybody is married to everybody, but there are seniority rights in sex), peoples his different societies with individualistic, possessive, competitive, pre-World War II Americans—just the people who could not live under the cooperative or communal arrangements he describes. Heinlein, for all his virtues, seems to me to exemplify science fiction's failure of imagination in the human sphere. He is superb at work but out of his element elsewhere. *Stranger in a Strange Land* seems to me a particular failure. I have heard Heinlein's women called "boy scouts with breasts"—but the subject takes more discussion than I can give it here. Alexei Panshin's critical study, *Heinlein in Dimension*, undertakes a thorough investigation of Heinlein vs. Sex. Heinlein loses.¹⁷

Matriarchy

The strangest and most fascinating oddities in science fiction occur not in the stories that try to abolish differences in gender roles but in those which attempt to reverse the roles themselves. Unfortunately, only a handful of writers have treated this theme seriously. Space opera abounds, but in space opera the reversal is always cut to the same pattern.

Into a world of cold, cruel, domineering women who are openly contemptuous of their cringing, servile men ("gutless" is a favorite word here) arrive(s) men (a man) from our present world. With a minimum of trouble, these normal men succeed in overthrowing the matriarchy, which although strong and warlike, is also completely inefficient. At this point the now dominant men experience a joyful return of victorious manhood and the women (after initial reluctance) declare that they too are much happier. Everything is (to quote S. J. Perelman) leeches and cream.¹⁸ Two interesting themes occur:

1. the women are far more vicious, sadistic, and *openly contemptuous* of men than comparable dominant men are of comparable subordinate women in the usual space opera.
2. the women are dominant because they are taller and stronger than the men (1).

Sometimes the story is played out among the members of an alien species modeled on insects or microscopic sea-creatures, so that tiny males are eaten or engulfed by huge females. I remember one in which a tiny male was eaten by a female who was not only forty feet tall but maddened to boot.¹⁹ There are times when science fiction leaves the domain of literature altogether. Least said, soonest mended.

I remember three British accounts of future matriarchies that could be called serious studies. In one the matriarchy is incidental. The society is presented as good because it embodies the traditionally feminine virtues of serenity, tolerance, love, and pacifism.²⁰ In John Wyndham's "Consider Her Ways" there are no men at all; the society is a static, hierarchical one which (like the first) is good because of its traditionally feminine virtues, which are taken as innate in the female character. There is something about matriarchy that makes science fiction writers think of two things: biological engineering and social insects; whether women are considered naturally chitinous or the softness of the female body is equated with the softness of the "soft" sciences I don't know, but the point is often made that "women are conservative by nature" and from there it seems an easy jump to bees or ants. Science fiction stories often make the point that a matriarchy will be static and hierarchical, like Byzantium or Egypt. (It should be remembered here that the absolute value of progress is one of the commonest shibboleths of science fiction.) The third story I remember—technically it's a "post-Bomb" story—was written by an author whose version of matriarchy sounds like Robert Graves's.²¹ The story makes the explicit point that while what is needed is static endurance, the Mother rules; when exploration and initiative again become necessary, the Father will return. The Great Mother is a real, supernatural character in this tale and the people in it are very real people. The matriarchy—again, the women rule by supernatural knowledge—is vividly realized and there is genuine exploration of

what personal relations would be like in such a society. There is a kind of uncompromising horror (the hero is hunted by "the hounds of the Mother"—women whose minds have been taken over by the Magna Mater) which expresses a man's fear of such a world much more effectively than all the maddened, forty-foot-tall male-gulpers ever invented.

So far I've been discussing fiction written by men and largely for men.²² What about fiction written by women?

Women's fiction: Potpourri

Most science fiction writers are men, but some are women, and there are more women writing the stuff than there used to be. The women's work falls into four rough categories:

1. *Ladies' magazine fiction*—in which the sweet, gentle, intuitive little heroine solves an interstellar crisis by mending her slip or doing something equally domestic after her big, heroic husband has failed. Zenna Henderson sometimes writes like this. *Fantasy and Science Fiction*, which carries more of this kind of writing than any of the other magazines, once earned a deserved slap over the knuckles from reviewer James Blish.²³
2. *Galactic suburbia*—very often written by women. Sometimes the characters are all male, especially if the story is set at work. Most women writing in the field (like so many of the men) write this kind of fiction.
3. *Space opera*—strange but true. Leigh Brackett is one example. Very rarely the protagonist turns out to be a sword-wielding, muscular, aggressive woman—but the he-man ethos of the world does not change, nor do the stereotyped personalities assigned to the secondary characters, particularly the female ones.
4. *Avant-garde fiction*—part of the recent rapprochement between the most experimental of the science fiction community and the most avant-garde of what is called "the mainstream." This takes us out of the field of science fiction altogether.²⁴

In general, stories by women tend to contain more active and lively female characters than do stories by men, and more often than men writers, women writers try to invent worlds in which men and women will be equals. But the usual faults show up just as often. The conventional idea that women are second-class people is a hard idea to shake; and while it is easy enough to show women doing men's work, or active in society, it is in the family scenes and the love scenes that one must look for the author's real freedom from our most destructive prejudices.

An odd equality

I would like to close with a few words about *The Left Hand of Darkness*, a fine book that won the Science Fiction Writers of American Nebula Award for 1969 as the best novel of

that year.²⁵ The book was written by a woman and it is about sex—I don't mean copulation; I mean what sexual identity means to people and what human identity means to them, and what kind of love can cross the barriers of culture and custom. It's a beautifully written book. Ursula K. Le Guin, the author, has imagined a world of human hermaphrodites—an experimental colony abandoned by its creators long ago and rediscovered by other human beings. The adults of this glacial world of Winter go through an oestrus cycle modeled on the human menstrual cycle: every four weeks the individual experiences a few days of sexual potency and obsessive interest in sex during which "he" becomes either male or female. The rest of the time "he" has no sex at all, or rather, only the potential of either. The cycle is involuntary, though it can be affected by drugs, and there is no choice of sex—except that the presence of someone already into the cycle and therefore of one sex will stimulate others in oestrus to become of the opposite sex. You would imagine that such a people's culture and institutions would be very different from ours and so they are; everything is finely realized, from their household implements to their customs to their creation myths. Again, however (and I'm very sorry to see it), family structure is not fully explained. Worse than that, child-rearing is left completely in the dark, although the human author herself is married and the mother of three children. Moreover, there is a human observer on Winter and he is male; and there is a native hero and *he is male*—at least "he" is *masculine in gender, if not in sex*. The native hero has a former spouse who is long-suffering, mild and gentle, while he himself is fiery, tough, self-sufficient, and proud. There is the Byronesque memory of a past incestuous affair; his lover and sibling is dead. There is an attempted seduction by a kind of Mata Hari *who is female* (so that the hero, of course, becomes male). It is, I must admit, a deficiency in the English language that these people must be called "he" throughout, but put that together with the native hero's personal encounters in the book, the absolute lack of interest in child-raising, the concentration on work, and what you have is a world of men. Thus the great love scene in the book is between two men: the human observer (who is a real man) and the native hero (who is a female man). The scene is nominally homosexual, but I think what lies at the bottom of it (and what has moved men and women readers alike) is that it is a love scene between a man and a woman, with the label "male: high status" pasted on the woman's forehead. Perhaps, with the straitjacket of our gender roles, with women automatically regarded as second-class, intelligent and active women *feel* as if they were female men or hermaphrodites. Or perhaps the only way a woman (even in a love scene) can be made a man's equal and the love scene therefore deeply moving, is to make her *nominally* male. That is, female in sex but male in gender. Here is the human narrator describing the alien hero:

to ignore the abstraction, to hold fast to the thing. There was in this attitude something feminine, a refusal of the abstract ideal, a submissiveness to the given . . .²⁶

Very conventional, although the story is set far, far in the future and the narrator is supposed to be a trained observer, a kind of anthropologist. Here is the narrator again, describing human women (he has been asked if they are "like a different species"):

No. Yes. No, of course not, not really. But the difference is very important, I suppose the most important thing, the heaviest single factor in one's life, is whether one's born male or female . . . Even where women participate equally with men in the society, they still after all do all the child-bearing and so most of the child-rearing . . .

And when asked "Are they mentally inferior?":

I don't know. They don't often seem to turn up mathematicians, or composers of music, or inventors, or abstract thinkers. But it isn't that they're stupid . . .²⁷

Let me remind you that this is centuries in the future. And again:

The boy . . . had a girl's quick delicacy in his looks and movements, but no girl could keep so grim a silence as he did . . .²⁸

It's the whole difficulty of science fiction, of genuine speculation: how to get away from traditional assumptions which are nothing more than traditional straitjackets.²⁹ Miss Le Guin seems to be aiming at some kind of equality between the sexes, but she certainly goes the long way around to get it; a whole new biology has to be invented, a whole society, a whole imagined world, so that finally she may bring together two persons of different sexes who will nonetheless be equals.³⁰

The title I chose for this essay was "The Image of Women in Science Fiction." I hesitated between that and "Women in Science Fiction" but if I had chosen the latter, there would have been very little to say.

There are plenty of images of women in science fiction.

There are hardly any women.

Notes

1. In conversation and in his discussion of "Speculative Fiction" given at the MLA Seminar on Science Fiction in New York City, December 27, 1968.
2. Basil Davenport, *Inquiry Into Science Fiction*, Longmans, Green and Co., New York, London, Toronto, 1955, pp. 39ff.
3. A recent novel by James Blish, *Black Easter*, published by Doubleday, Garden City, N.Y. in 1968, does exactly this. See in particular the Introduction, pp. 7-8.
4. Samuel Delany, "About Five Thousand One Hundred and Seventy Five Words," in *Extrapolation: the Newsletter of the Conference on Science Fiction of the MLA*, ed. Thomas D. Clareson, College of Wooster, Wooster, Ohio, Vol. X, No. 2, May 1969, pp. 61-63.
5. There have been exceptions, e.g. Olaf Stapledon, George Bernard Shaw. And of course Philip Wylie's *The Disappearance*. Wylie's novel really ranks as a near-future story, though.
6. Frederik Pohl, *The Age of the Pussyfoot*, Trident Press, New York, 1968.
7. I don't want to adduce further examples, but most well-known science fiction is of this kind. It suffices to read *Childhood's End* for example (Arthur C. Clarke), and ask about the Utopian society of the middle: What do the men do? What do the women do? Who raises the children? And so on.

8. See William Atheling, Jr. (James Blish), *The Issue at Hand*, Advent Press, Chicago, 1964, pp. 117–19. I ought to make it clear that I am talking here of science fiction as a literary/cultural phenomenon, e.g., nobody can accuse George Bernard Shaw of suffering from the he-man ethos. But Shaw's ventures into science fiction have had little influence on the American tradition.
9. The American pioneer was Hugo Gernsback, whose name adorns the "Hugo," the yearly fan awards for best novel of the year, best short story, etc. In 1908 Gernsback founded a magazine called *Modern Electrics*, the world's first radio magazine. In 1911 he published a serial of his own writing called "Ralph 124C41+." Gernsback founded *Amazing Stories* in 1926 and by common consent, real science entered the field with John W. Campbell, Jr., in the late 1930s.
10. Some of the better writers in this genre are Keith Laumer, Gordon Dickson, and Poul Anderson. Most magazine fiction is at least tainted with space opera.
11. In *Age of the Pussyfoot* the heroine makes her living by trying out consumer products. She is so ordinary (or statistically extraordinary) that if she likes the products, the majority of the world's consumers will also like them. A prominent character in John Brunner's recent novel, *Stand on Zanzibar*, is a clairvoyant.
12. Also "soap opera"—the roles of the sexes are reversed.
13. I would put the ratio of male to female readers at about five to one. It might very well be higher.
14. I think March and I think it was *Amazing*; it is either *Amazing* or *Worlds of If* for 1968 or 1969. Sorry!
15. Me.
16. It is noteworthy, however, that the ladies of the crew spend their time as nurses, stewardesses and telephone operators.
17. See Alexei Panshin's *Heinlein in Dimension*, Advent Press, Chicago, 1968, especially Chapter VI.
18. Entertaining use can be made of this form. Keith Laumer's delightfully tongue-in-cheek "The War With the Yukks" is a case in point. You will now complain that I don't tell you where to find it, but trying to find uncollected stories or novellas is a dreadful task. I don't know where it is. I read it in a magazine publication; magazines vanish.
19. Again, vanished without a trace. It's an oldie and I suspect it appeared in one of Groff Conklin's fat anthologies of *The Best S.F. for (fill in year)*. It was a lovely story.
20. This one may be American. A Russian (or American) and a Red Chinese, both from our present, are somehow transported into the future. They kill each other at a party in a xenophobic rage which their hostesses find tragic and obsolete. I remember that the ladies in the story shave their heads (that is, the ladies' own heads). Not exactly a matriarchy but a semi-reversal of gender roles occurs in Philip Wylie's *The Disappearance*, a brilliant argument to the effect that gender roles are learned and can be unlearned.
21. Again I find myself with distinct memories of the story and none of the author's name. I would appreciate any information. Science fiction is in a dreadful state bibliographically.
22. This is perhaps too sweeping a statement; Isaac Asimov certainly writes for everybody, to give one example only. But male readers do outnumber female readers, and there is a definite bias in the field toward what I have called the he-man ethos. I think the generalization can stand as a generalization.
23. See William Atheling, Jr. (James Blish), *The Issue at Hand*, Advent Press, Chicago, 1964, p. 112.
24. Carol Emshwiller is a good example. See the *Orbit* series of anthologies edited by Damon Knight (Putnam's in hardcover, Berkley in paperback).