

"DON'T PANIC"

An Exploration of the Literary Value of Science Fiction

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1. Introduction: Don't Panic, It's Only Science Fiction

In Douglas Adams's *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* series, one of the most popular works of science fiction (SF), the inhabitants of this fictional universe can turn to two encyclopaedias when they want to learn more about the universe. The *Encyclopaedia Galactica* is the most logical choice, since it contains accurate, well-structured information on practically any subject. However in most parts of the galaxy, the *Encyclopaedia Galactica* has been replaced by the *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, for two important reasons: "First, it is slightly cheaper; and secondly it has the words *DON'T PANIC* inscribed in large friendly letters on its cover" (Adams 5).

Like in the rest of the novel, Adams is not only demonstrating his wit here, but also exposing an actual problem. Knowledge of the galaxy in all its strangeness is a scary thing, and Adams points out that people need some reassurance before they can face it, even if it is only through an encouraging text on the cover of an encyclopaedia. Likewise, readers nowadays appear to be daunted by the idea of exploring the (fictional) universe through SF novels: as a label, the genre is more likely to scare readers away (especially serious readers, i.e. those with interest in literature) than to attract them. While talking about his SF novel *Halfhead*, Stuart MacBride claimed that writing about a crime in the past makes for a so-called historical novel, a well-regarded genre which always receives its share of awards (the 2012 Man Booker Prize went to a historical novel). However, "[s]et the same crime 20 years into the future and suddenly it's SCIENCE FICTION!!! RUN AWAY!!! And a lot of readers won't even try it" (qtd. in Barnett *Crime*). Taking this into account, stamping "DON'T PANIC" on all SF novels might not be such a bad idea.

It cannot be denied that SF has not made a good name for itself: contemporary usage of the term is mostly negative. It is used to describe extremely cliché (and therefore ridiculous) plots and tropes or extremely farfetched (and therefore ridiculous) ideas. Margaret Atwood, who sometimes writes SF (even though she often denies this herself), once infamously stated that "[s]cience fiction is rockets, chemicals and talking squids in outer space" (qtd. in Barnett *Science*). Science fiction is inevitably connected with the unrealistic and thus irrelevant. In his science fiction fanzine and newsletter *Ansible*, David Langfield always includes one or two quotes in the category "How Others See Us", which shows the (usually) negative outlook people have on SF. One example is that of a quote from the DVD of dystopian film *The Hunger Games* (2012), where costume designer Judianna Makovsky

says in the extras: "I think my job as costume designer is really to create the vision that the director has ... Gary [the director] wanted to make a movie that was real, that wasn't a science fiction film" (qtd. in Langfield). She is saying this about a film which is set in a dystopian future where the sinister Capitol chooses twelve representatives from amongst the population of Panem to fight a televised battle to the death (the Hunger Games) in an arena where Gamemakers can remotely control elements of the landscape. Apparently, this is nowhere as unrealistic as genuine science fiction, whatever that might then refer to. This tendency from people to refuse to have their work labelled SF is widespread.

This negative image of SF as a whole also has its effects on written SF, which suffers from the same prejudices as other works in the genre. In written fiction, SF is not considered a serious genre, but only one of the many genre-fictions (like fantasy and horror) that stands opposite literary fiction. Take, for example, this quote from an article in *The Guardian* about how downmarket genre fiction is the most popular in the eBook market: "Kindle-owning bibliophiles are furtive beasts. Their shelves still boast classics and Booker winners. But inside that plastic case, other things lurk. Sci-fi and self-help. Even paranormal romance, where vampires seduce virgins and elves bonk trolls" (Senior). Apparently, SF has no better claims to the status of serious literature than self-help books. Moreover, Senior portrays SF as nothing more than a guilty pleasure, like erotic novels. The success of the erotic novel *Fifty Shades of Grey* was partially due to the rise of the eBook: "E-readers hide the material. Erotica sells well" (Senior). SF, too, Senior claims, is preferably read only when people can prevent others from seeing them do it, preventing them from being associated with something as downmarket as SF. A last interesting quote comes from a course description of the Oxford Open Learning online Writing School, which claims that it can provide students with the skill to write any novel, "[w]hether it is a thriller, a romance, comedy, historical fiction, a whodunit or even science fiction" ("Novel"). Yes, *even* science fiction.

This negative image has led to writers refusing to be seen as a part of the SF field. Margaret Atwood, some of whose works can certainly be called SF (as I will demonstrate later in this thesis) has always reacted strongly against being called an SF writer. This is partly because of marketing reasons. Brian Aldiss, in a letter to *The Times*, commented on Atwood's behaviour: "Her life would have been more difficult had she not cleverly denied that her early science fiction novels, such as *A Handmaid's Tale*, were science fiction ... Had she neglected this strategy, there would have been for her no more literary festivals, no more reviews, no more appearances on BBC breakfast programmes" (qtd. in Barnett *Science*). Similarly, Nick Harkaway's *The Gone-Away World* (2008) also contains SF elements, but "his publishers

William Heinemann have taken a lot of care not to market the book as such. Harkaway himself said in a recent interview: 'I suppose the book does take place in the future, but not the ray-guns-and-silver-suits future. It's more like tomorrow if today was a really, really bad day'" (qtd. in Barnett *Science*). Harkaway fails to note, however, that SF is just as much about this more realistic version of a bad tomorrow than about the ray-guns and silver suits. Within the SF field, many have argued against this trend and tried to gain literary recognition for certain serious SF works. Ursula LeGuin, one the most renowned SF writers, has said that

[t]o define science fiction as a purely commercial category of fiction, inherently trashy, having nothing to do with literature, is a tall order. It involves both denying that any work of science fiction can have literary merit, and maintaining that any book of literary merit that uses the tropes of science fiction (such as *Brave New World*, or *1984*, or *A Handmaid's Tale* ...) is not science fiction. (LeGuin "Calling")

In this thesis, I will try to show that written SF has more merits than most people acknowledge and that some works can even claim literary status. To do this, I will first focus on the history of SF as a genre, emphasising two different developments within the field of SF: that of the pulpy, popular side (the side of SF that is widely known) and that of the more serious, thoughtful side. In this first chapter, I will show that SF has always known a tension between low-quality popular SF and a more intellectual, even literary, minority within the field. At the same time, I will use this chapter to explain where the negative image of SF as a genre came from.

After this historical overview I will turn to the poetics of SF. It is difficult to give one all-encompassing definition for any genre, and the same goes for SF. Still, there is enough scholarly material on SF to distil a poetics and gather some elements that together form a framework that adequately describes what SF is and how it functions. After establishing this framework, I will compare this with some elements that critics usually agree on as being characteristic of literature, to show that a work produced by using the SF framework can indeed aspire to literary status.

To prove that claim, I will then test my model of the poetics of SF in three different case studies. The first is an analysis of Ursula LeGuin's landmark SF novel *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1971). The SF award-winning novel is regarded as one of the best in the field: in my analysis, I will show that this novel also has literary qualities. In my second case study I will focus on a book already mentioned: Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), which has won both SF awards and the prestigious Man Booker Prize. This is one of the rare

examples of a novel that is both successful within the SF field and outside it. Atwood, however, has always refused to acknowledge that the novel is SF: in my analysis, I will show that the novel's strength does come from using the SF framework. Lastly, I will discuss Cormac McCarthy's Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Road* (2006): the literary value of this work is not disputed, but its status as an SF novel is. Many SF enthusiasts are eager to include this critically acclaimed work among their number, however, and for good reasons. With this thesis, I hope to provide my readers with a more balanced view of SF than the view which is now widespread. Following what has become tradition in SF criticism, I will start by referring to the famous Sturgeon's Law: this SF writer once claimed that indeed "90% of science fiction is crud, but 90% of everything is crud" (qtd. in Scholes and Rabkin 62). In this thesis, I will try to bring that ten percent the attention it deserves.

2. It Did Not Come from Outer Space: Origins and History of Science Fiction

Nowadays, both scholars and casual readers are strongly divided on the genre of SF: while not everybody is able to explain what the genre is about, most people will instinctively know whether they like it or not. SF is a much more complex genre than most people (and most scholars) think, however. While there is of course some truth to the stereotypical image of SF as either an escapist outer space spectacle or an alien creature feature, written SF especially has a more complex side. I will briefly sketch the history of written SF here to show that the genre has always known both a popular, low-quality branch but also a more serious type of SF that has managed to develop within this ghetto of pulp. I will explain how both these trends started and in that way not only explain where SF got its negative reputation from, but also show its complexity and provide the background for a more thorough research into SF's literary side in the following chapters.

2.1 Origins: Early Ancestry and Two Fathers

There is no general consensus about the precise starting point for SF. As Adam Roberts points out, scholars usually mention texts ranging from ancient Latin works to 19th century novels before acknowledging the two fathers of SF: Jules Verne and H.G. Wells, who wrote their relevant works at the end of the 19th century (48). Concerning the older texts scholars mention, Roberts identifies two trends: there are those who see SF as "a specific artistic response to a very particular set of historical and cultural phenomena" (46), such as the Industrial Revolution and its rapid technological changes, while others like to "[s]tress the antiquity of SF" (47) by showing how different texts from across time and across cultures all display the same longing for extraordinary (space) voyages and imaginary worlds (46).

Stableford, for example, starts his exploration of proto-SF texts in 380 BC, with Plato's *Republic*, which he claims is one of the first utopian texts (4). Likewise, Stableford uses Roman writer Lucian's *True Histories*, which features travels to the moon, as a starting point for the subgenre of extraordinary voyages (5). Scholes and Rabkin do not sympathise with this kind of approach, claiming that these works are only mentioned "to add distinction to the pedigree" (6). Indeed, works like *The Republic* and *True Histories*, but also Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667) and Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) certainly provide a genre that has always struggled for recognition with an impressive ancestry. While these works might contain elements of SF, it is mere wishful thinking (or, as

Samuel Delany puts it, "pedagogic snobbery" (qtd. in Roberts 51)) to include these works on a list of "ancient works of SF" (Roberts 51); SF as a genre, rather than a string of incidents, only developed in the early twentieth century.

Very much in SF style, the genre is said to have two fathers: Jules Verne and H.G. Wells. Verne is mostly credited for introducing the scientific aspect to science fiction. He wrote a number of stories, most notably *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* (1863), *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea* (1870) and the outer-space adventure *Around the Moon* (1870), in which scientific developments play a central role. Stableford describes Verne's stories as "carefully constrained extrapolations of contemporary technology" (11), pointing to Verne's often strict adherence to scientific laws and technological progress. This strictness always had preference over the story: for example, since Verne could think of no plausible way to launch his space voyagers back into space once they had landed on the moon, he only had them orbit the moon before returning to Earth, making up in scientific good conscience for what he lost in spectacular narrative possibilities.

The other important figure was H.G. Wells, who took the already existing concept of the future-war story and turned it into "a broader speculative genre, which journalists and reviewers labelled 'scientific romance'" (Stableford 15). Wells had a background in biology and was able to apply this scientific knowledge to his works. At the same time his imaginative writing was able to captivate the attention of his readers, ensuring a rare "synthesis of thought and action in fiction" (Scholes and Rabkin 26). Also, Wells went further than Verne by flirting with the boundaries of science, using, for example, spaceships and a time-travelling machine for which he had no plausible scientific explanation. Jules Verne complained about the fact that Wells *did* make his ships land on and take off from alien planets: "I make use of physics. He invents" (qtd. in Roberts 60). Wells always stayed close to reality, however, never making his stories too strange. This balance provided SF with new prospects, by "liberating the future as an imaginative space for serious speculative endeavor" (Stableford 16).

Wells is important for SF as a whole, but certainly also for the more serious branch of SF in Europe, later called scientific romance. Wells was most influential in Britain, though his stories were also published in magazines in the United States. In the US, however, another writer started to exert a major influence over the genre of SF and its future course, an influence which has lasted up to this day. Edgar Rice Burroughs published his first story, "Under the Moon of Mars", in a magazine in 1912. This story was later made into a novel, *The Princess of Mars*, which started an entire series of novels on Mars. His books, seventy in total, were (and are) immensely popular, with total estimated sales having passed the hundred

million mark in the seventies (Scholes and Rabkin 12). However, Scholes and Rabkin also claim that "no literary critic can speak of his work without embarrassment" (12). Burroughs started the subgenre of pulp fantasy SF, which had little concern for technological plausibility but instead used outer space and alien planets as a mere background for romance and drama. His focus was on "prettified violence and a tantalizing threat of sex" (Scholes and Rabkin 12) on worlds that resembled "fairy tales and the Arabian Nights" (Scholes and Rabkin 12). While Wells at times concerned himself with social criticism, Burroughs only focused on "an extreme of escapist self-indulgence" (Stableford 23).

Scholes and Rabkin rightly note that Burroughs should not just be written off: his greatest merit was his "genuine inventiveness" (12), his ability to create new worlds convincingly. Burroughs helped establish a struggling new genre. Unfortunately, his specific kind of SF has helped create the negative image of SF as spectacular escapism. This effect can still be seen today: in 2012, Disney released *John Carter*, a film version of Burroughs's first novel, which, in terms of quality, is very much like the novels. The film received mixed criticisms, with the consensus on *RottenTomatoes* being: "While *John Carter* looks terrific and delivers its share of pulpy thrills, it also suffers from uneven pacing and occasionally incomprehensible plotting and characterization" ("*John Carter*"). This is indeed characteristic of the stories by Burroughs and those inspired by him: imaginative, but often lacking coherence and depth. However, because of its popularity, this type of SF largely dominates views of the genre.

2.2 Two Trends: American SF and British Scientific Romance

This difference between Wells and Burroughs typifies the two different directions SF went into as a genre. In the US, magazines played an important role in the literary market. Whereas some middle-class magazines were printed on shiny paper, and became known as "the slicks", lower quality stories were printed in cheap, mass-produced magazines on flimsy paper: "the pulps". It is in the pulps that SF started to develop; catering to the demands of the audience, much early pulp SF was action-based escapism in the style of Burroughs. A change came with Hugo Gernsback, a landmark figure in SF history whose interest in science led him to launch the first ever SF magazine that had any durability, *Amazing Stories*, in 1926. Around this time, SF started to take shape as a genre, although Gernsback eventually had the idea of calling it "scientifiction". Luckily, he realised that having such a ridiculous tongue breaker of a name would not do the already struggling genre any good and settled for "science fiction" instead.

While Gernsback at first published all kinds of texts, both reprints from Verne and Wells and stories by Burroughs (in order "to appeal to the pulp fiction audience" (Stableford 25)), he made clear the direction he envisioned for SF in a 1929 editorial in *Amazing Stories*:

Not only is science fiction an idea of tremendous import, but it is to be an important factor in making the world a better place to live in, through educating the public to the possibilities of science and the influence of science on life... If every man, woman, boy and girl could be induced to read science fiction right along, there would certainly be a great resulting benefit to the community... Science fiction would make people happier, give them a broader understanding of the world, make them tolerant. (qtd. in Roberts 68)

Gernsback had serious faith in SF. He saw SF as more than a genre, as a means of educating people on science and its possibilities, with the pulpy side of the genre as nothing more than the attractive "sugar coating" (Stableford 26).

In truth, however, Gernsback had troubles filling his magazines with purely scientific stories and frequently included the more pulpy SF stories in his magazines as well. It is typical of the genre at the time that Gernsback was very pleased about publishing stories of 'Doc' E. E. Smith, constantly emphasising Smith's PhD (even though it was in food science, specialisation: "doughnut mixes" (James 47)), while people were mainly impressed by the epic scope of Smith's stories. He started the subgenre of the space opera, melodramatic space adventures that take place in vast galaxies, of which the *Star Wars* film series is one of the best-known examples. In contrast, the stories Gernsback preferred were sometimes very dry, with many scientific details fired at the readers at once in a so-called info dump. SF needed its pulpy side to establish itself as a genre and attract a wider audience, and this made it into "a bizarre patchwork of methods, styles and ambitions" (Stableford 27).

At the same time, pre- and post-WWI SF in Britain and the rest of Europe (often called scientific romance) was going through a different kind of development. In the wake of Wells (and in the absence of a thriving pulp magazine industry; British SF was mostly published in book form), there were "a number of extraordinary writers of science fiction, whose works are emotionally powerful, demanding and socially aware" (Scholes and Rabkin 27). Utopian and dystopian novels were particularly popular, with Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) as the most important example. The war crudely interrupted the development of scientific romance, however, and after the war the whole subgenre had to develop itself again, be it with a rather negative attitude towards science and with pessimistic rather than optimistic stories, as a result of the war. One of the problems of the writers,

Stableford notes, was that suggestions of escapism, for example, "came to seem suspiciously akin to cowardice in the face of the enemy" (19) and that some works of scientific romance were therefore treated with hostility. Add to that the economic problems caused by the war, and it becomes clear why the American branch of SF, which faced no such obstructions, developed much quicker.

Stableford emphasises the impact of the war, claiming that it played a crucial (and mainly negative) role in the development of SF (19). Scholes and Rabkin imaginatively speak of SF writers in Europe as "a few isolated giants" (26) facing an American "horde of pygmies" (26). The divide created by the war, with the mainly pulpy SF on the west side of the Atlantic and the more serious but sparse efforts on the east, remained so during the interwar period. In Europe, writers like Aldous Huxley, Olaf Stapledon, Karl Capek (to whom we owe the word 'robot') and Yevgeni Zamyatin (whose *We* influenced another SF-inspired work of literature, Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*) were turning scientific romance into "a branch, be it a minor branch, of literature" (James 44) which "could be taken seriously by intellectuals and even literary critics" (James 44).

An important factor here was that at the time these works were not really seen as belonging to a genre (the term scientific romance was given in retrospect, as a response to the similarities which are certainly there) and especially not as the SF genre that was at that moment developing in America. Without the negative connotations of pulpy SF, scientific romance was able to nurture some hope of becoming a respectable literary genre. These efforts, however, were thwarted when WWII halted the development of scientific romance. During and after the war, economic and practical problems arose for scientific romance writers and publishers, which created a "vacuum that could be filled by American SF" (James 73), which was both cheaper and easier to acquire, since European SF production had come to a standstill. Furthermore, the important role of America in the WWII and the threat of the Cold War made people "more interested in a fiction which looked to the future, and to a future which increasingly looked as if it was going to be an American one" (James 74). American SF became dominant worldwide, but because of its pulpy connotations it "bequeathed a largely unfortunate heritage" (James 48) on SF as a genre, creating prejudices against the genre that still exist today. This effectively destroyed the hopes of scientific romance becoming a recognised literary genre: the image of SF became that of the pulps, with its flashy covers, action-based stories, far-fetched escapist tales and monster stories. One need only glance at the title of a typical 1930 pulp story to understand why these stories gave the genre a bad name: "The Beetle Horde: Only Two Young Explorers Stand in the Way of the Mad Bram's

Horrible Revenge — the Releasing of his Trillions of Man-Sized Beetles upon an Utterly Defenseless World" (Rousseau 229). However, this image of SF is not entirely wrong: Stableford reminds his readers that pulp SF was "almost without exception, horribly bad fiction — but it was a kind of bad fiction that was capable of becoming much better" (44).

2.3 American Domination: The Golden Age of SF

In America, SF had just reached its so-called Golden Age, a term used to describe the period of expansion and maturation of the genre in America from the late thirties into the forties (and, some critics would argue, the fifties), with great writers like Isaac Asimov, Robert A. Heinlein, A.E. van Vogt and Theodore Sturgeon (to name only a few) producing some of the landmark SF stories. One of the leading figures in this period was John W. Campbell, Jr., who became editor of the important SF magazine *Astounding Stories of Super-Science* in 1938. He intended to take SF into a more mature direction: he made the covers of the magazines less flashy and replaced its bug-eyed monsters, scantily clad women and enormous laser-shooting spaceships with "slick modernistic machinery, plausible human beings, and sometimes with realistic astronomical paintings" (James 56). Likewise, *Astounding Stories of Super Science* was renamed *Astounding Science Fiction*, and only the advent of the magazine *Science Fiction* in 1939 prevented Campbell from dropping the pulpy "astounding" altogether (James 56). Not only did he try to decrease SF's pulpy element, he was also not as technology- and gadget-orientated as Gernsback: stories were not to be "about machines and great ideas, but about how those machines and great ideas affected individuals and society as a whole" (James 57). For the first time, writers were "trying to produce better written works of speculation, which ranged more widely and thought more deeply than the standard SF pulp adventures" (James 87).

Apart from aiming at a maturation of SF in terms of its subjects, Campbell also helped to improve the quality of writing. Carter is honest about SF when he writes that because only the good SF has been anthologised, we "mercifully forget just how bad so much of the residue was" (46). In many of Gernsback's preferred stories, for example, "the story slowly leaked away while the characters poured forth great gobs of scientific explanation" (Carter 46). However, while the quality of some SF improved, the expanding market was at the same time flooded with qualitatively inferior SF, at first in Gernsback's second magazine, *Thrilling Wonder Stories* and later on in any of the number of new magazines (with titles like *Astonishing Stories* and *Stirring Science Stories*) that kept popping up.

The writers previously mentioned as being typical of the Golden Age exemplify this

division in the genre. Isaac Asimov, on the one hand, has become most famous for his *Foundation* series, in which he took the idea of 'psychohistory' (predicting the path of the future on the basis of scientific principles, using, for example, history and psychology) and applied it to a macro history that spanned several centuries and an entire galaxy. Asimov makes us "think about the structure of the universe and human mentality — about our relations to technology, to time, and to history" (Scholes and Rabkin 62). At the same time, "his style is at best serviceable, his psychological penetration never deep" (Scholes and Rabkin 62). Moreover, another popular writer of that period, A.E. van Vogt, was "a careless and forgetful writer" (Scholes and Rabkin 52) with little concern for a coherent plot, "precisely the kind of writer that has given science fiction a bad name among serious readers" (Scholes and Rabkin 52). So even when SF was developing into a more mature direction, it has always had to co-exist (quite literally, since all stories were published in the same magazines, with practically no SF books being published in the US) with the pulpy, adventurous side of SF.

Where European scientific romance had a tradition of pessimism and concerned itself mainly with warnings for the future (again, consider *Brave New World*), American SF, especially that of the Golden Age, had a more positive outlook on life and was eager to explore the limits of science. American SF writers believed, "in contrast to almost all British writers of 'scientific romance' between the wars, that humanity had a positive future and that it lay in the exploration of space" (James 78). The utopian tradition of scientific romance was also denounced, since American writers believed that "a human utopia would be the road to stagnation and the death of the human will, because it would rule out the challenge and the frontier spirit" (James 78). Space was the final frontier.

The Golden Age American SF that flooded Europe after the war ensured that the American outlook became dominant. American magazines were reprinted and authentic magazines published reprints of American stories. John Carnell, who launched the most renowned British SF magazine, *New Worlds*, in 1949, was giving new writers a chance, but had to publish American SF too, "partly for reasons of competition: he knew his readers were well acquainted with American sf, and to a large extent regarded American sf as setting the standard" (James 77). It is no wonder, therefore, that one of the most celebrated British SF writers, Arthur C. Clarke, whose novel *Childhood's End* (1953) is one of the best-loved SF novels (James 78), wrote for a large part in the American tradition.

Rather than developing independently, European scientific romance became a part of the mainstream, largely American-inspired SF. This was partly because of the stagnation in

local SF development during the wars; without that, "[p]erhaps ... scientific romance would not have been so utterly overwhelmed by American SF" (Stableford 44). But this development was not wholly negative: American SF also had its redeeming qualities, and the coming together of the different qualities was important for SF in becoming a mature genre. As Stableford eloquently puts it:

While it was still gestating in its pulp womb ... American science fiction brought about a zygotic fusion of the fundamental impetus of Wellsian scientific romance and the narrative energy of Burroughsian otherworldly exotica, lightly leavened with casual extravagant tall tales of scientific miracle-making. Without that fusion, the collaborative work of horizon expansion, social extrapolation and moral re-sophistication that has been the labor and triumph of modern SF could not have begun, let alone proceeded so rapidly. (44)

While most critics call the 1940's the Golden Age, James argues that the 1950's, or at least a part of it, could also be called a part of the Golden Age. In the forties, the process of maturation in both writing style and subject matter started, and indeed many of the now classic themes of SF first came into being in the forties (James 87). In the fifties, however, writers were able to expand upon these improvements, by applying and improving the techniques writers were using in the forties while at the same time exploring the topics "in more detail, and often at greater length" (James 88). This was partly due to developments in the literary market: the rise of the paperback made it possible for SF to grow from the magazine-length short stories to full-length novels (Roberts 82). Some stories were 'fixed-up', i.e. turned from short stories into novels, but writers were also starting to write original novels.

2.4 Consolidation: Establishing the Major Themes

As I have already mentioned, SF was partly moving in a direction where adventure had to make way for intellectual speculation. Outer space, alien civilisations and technological marvels were no longer just used as backdrops to action and adventure, but also as instruments to explore the nature of mankind, its place in the universe and its future. These speculative stories were often based on contemporary events, like the Holocaust, the nuclear bomb, the Cold War and the development of artificial intelligence (AI). Among the major themes that developed were those of future speculation, conceptual breakthrough and extra-sensory perception.

The speculative theme of answering the question "What if...?" was one of the most important themes fully developed in SF's Golden Age. The scenario of a possible destructive nuclear war was most prominent, especially after 1945. Often, SF writers explored the dark ages after a nuclear holocaust and eventually, the post-apocalyptic story in itself became the main theme, with the nuclear disaster sometimes being replaced with, for example, some kind of natural disaster. These stories were often "an evaluation of how societies decline into tribalism and barbarism ... or develop from barbarism to civilization" (James 90). A good example is Walter M. Miller's *A Canticle for Leibowitz*. This Hugo-award¹ winning 1960 'fix-up' of three short stories tells of the dark ages after a nuclear war, where religious institutes have preserved some technology from an engineer named Leibowitz and made them into relics. Gradually, this technology is recognised for what it is and civilisation emerges again, merely to fall victim to another nuclear war. This post-apocalyptic tale of rebuilding civilisation has become an important subgenre, with both SF writers, mainstream writers (like Stephen King, most notably in *The Stand* (1978)) and literary writers (Cormac McCarthy in *The Road* (2006)) taking up the theme.

James identifies a second major theme that developed in this period, that of the so-called "conceptual breakthrough" (James 91), which he compares to Thomas Kuhn's ideas of paradigm change. In these stories, characters (and/or the readers) gain knowledge in a way that alters their view of the world. A classic example is Isaac Asimov's celebrated short story "Nightfall" (1941), where the inhabitants of the planet Lagash, after centuries of believing that the universe consists of nothing more than their planet and its six suns, experience an eclipse in which they glimpse the entirety of the universe and its many stars; the shock of their insignificance turns them mad. Interestingly, this civilisation is fairly advanced: they have universities and advanced astronomy, for example. However, because of its six suns, the planet never experienced darkness, never saw the stars and therefore never considered the possibility of a universe outside their own. This (to us) obvious blind spot shows how even a civilisation much like ours, one that thinks highly of itself, can remain oblivious to essential facts.

Other important themes were also developed in this period. One of them is that of extra-sensory perception (ESP), which refers to mental powers like telepathy. *Childhood's End* is one novel that explores ESP, and John Campbell himself believed in the merits of

¹ The two most important SF awards are the Hugo Awards for best SF (named for Hugo Gernsback) and the Nebula Awards for best American SF. The Arthur C. Clarke Award is the British equivalent of the Nebula Award.

investigating this phenomenon, even writing editorials in *Astounding* to promote this. Another theme, which tied in with the developments in the space race, was that of space travel and, of course, the encounter with the alien. The last theme especially was later taken up by feminist writers, who introduced their readers to alien societies where gender roles were different or non-existent in order to analyse or criticise gender.

2.5 Refinement: Mainstream Breakthrough and the New Wave

SF was not only maturing, the genre also went from marginal to mainstream. Critics do not agree on when this happened. While Roberts quotes Huntington, who emphasises the importance of the sixties and the activist and sceptic attitude of youths who then took up an alternative genre like SF (81), James dates the development to the fifties and links it to several factors: a growing concern over the future (caused by the Cold War), a subject much discussed in SF; the higher quality of SF; the increased availability of SF through the rise of the cheap paperback; and lastly, but not unimportantly, the growing attention for SF in other media, like comics and film (84). For the first time, SF books were turning into bestsellers: Frank Herbert's *Dune* (1965) and Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1961) were some of the first SF bestsellers, while J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* (1954-1955) sixties paperback reprints managed to do the same in another marginal genre, often related to SF: fantasy.

However, while qualitatively sound SF stories were attempting to rid SF of its pulpy connotations, the mainstream demand for SF also led to much lower quality work, especially in film. Any reader who now attempts a quick YouTube search for early SF film trailers will almost certainly lose the confidence in SF I have gradually tried to build over these last pages. While quality SF was moving away from spectacles and creature features, Hollywood capitalised on it. Audiences were terrorised by the monster that "came from outer space, to fill the world with terror, to bring you unforgettable suspense" (fraserw2) in 1953, only to be warned in 1958 for the terrible *Blob*: "everyone of you watching this screen, watch out, because soon, soon the most horrifying monster menace ever conceived will be oozing into this cinema" (RetroAlexander). These films were as one-dimensional as the trailers make them sound, which was "a great pity, reinforcing as it did the general reader's or viewer's impression that this was all there was to SF" (Carter 56). This tradition continued into the sixties and seventies, when films like the immensely popular space western *Star Wars* began to dominate the way SF would be seen for a long time after. While this did attract many new readers to the genre, it also reinforced the negative image of SF, which was then only made

worse by the dominance of large publishing companies over the literary SF market, where paperbacks were taking the place of the magazines. Anything "in which a publisher scented bestseller potential had best be promoted as something, indeed as *anything* else" (Carter 52-3): so low-quality SF was marketed as SF, while this label was not always given to the works of higher quality.

As a response to these developments, the late 1960's saw the advent of the so-called New Wave of SF writing. This was a movement of writers who believed SF had lost its freshness and was becoming stale, and tried to give SF an impulse of quality by doing literary experiments. It started in Britain, where Michael Moorcock, who became editor of the popular British SF magazine *New Worlds* in 1964, was the driving force. Scholes and Rabkin call it "a stimulating and exciting period for the literature of science fiction, full of daring experiments of varying degrees of success" (88). Not only did New Wave writers aim for a larger degree of "literariness" in SF, they also wanted to break with the tradition of using outer space as a setting: inner space, the inner workings of man was to become the focus of SF (172).

Not everybody, neither readers nor writers, was pleased with these developments. Brian Aldiss, a popular SF writer who, as Moorcock and others liked to emphasise, embraced certain New Wave ideals, had rather negative ideas about the movement himself, as can be read in his letters:

One feature of this particular wave (which I suspect to be a journalistic intervention of yours and Mike Moorcock's, ultimately of no service to any writers willy-nilly involved...) is a strong tendency to abolish plot. Plot, I mean, in the grander sense of structure ... I feel I am no part of the New Wave; I was here before 'em, and by God I mean to be here after they've gone (still writing bloody science fiction)! (qtd. in James 172)

This quote is exemplary of the concerns about New Wave SF at the time: many readers and critics thought it was too experimental, questioning whether the works could still be called SF and, in the more experimental cases, whether they were even "readable" (James 172).

In America, New Wave was less extreme. Writers who picked up on the movement, most notably Samuel R. Delany, Thomas M. Disch, Robert E. Silverberg and Roger Zelazny, did not all break so radically with SF tradition as the British New Wave did, but rather aimed to improve classic SF (James 173). They retained the classic themes but injected them with "a new interest in style, psychological complexity and interest in character, as well as some topics that were at least conventionally regarded as taboo" (James 173). Despite initial criticism, New Wave SF quickly earned widespread recognition and started to win SF awards.

Together with British New Wave writer Harlan Ellison the four writers mentioned above won an amazing 17 Nebula and Hugo Awards in different categories in the period 1965-1969 (Levy 63).

So while New Wave was too radical to cause the precise transformation of SF it envisioned, it did at least sharpen the division between pulpy and serious SF. In reaction to this more literary side of SF, other writers re-established the still popular genre of "hard SF": Larry Niven, with his Nebula and Hugo-winning *Ringworld* (1970) was in the forefront of hard SF, which has remained popular to this day (Levy 64). They favoured traditional elements like space exploration and physics above "the soft sciences of psychology and sociology" (James 178) and "pure literary experimentation" (James 178). *Astounding*, renamed *Analog*, became the bastion for hard SF and remained the magazine "where fiction is often written by practising scientists or engineers rather than, as was becoming more and more common everywhere else, by writers who majored in English" (James 178).

2.6 Diversification: Women Writers, Cyberpunk and Popular Success

Another important development in the sixties was the influx of women writers into the genre. SF had largely been a (white) male genre, but the first successful women writers started the subgenre of feminist SF in the sixties. A classic drawback of SF was the lack of character development; in the more mature SF, however, the increasing attention to proper characterisation allowed for women writers to explore gender roles through SF. This was not easy: because of "the almost total absence of believable female characters" (James 183) in SF, feminist writers lacked literary role models. James claims that Joanna Russ's Alyx, from her 1968 *Picnic on Paradise*, was the first believable, strong woman character in SF (184). Other writers, like James Tiptree Jr. (a pseudonym of Alice Sheldon's) and especially Ursula LeGuin explored feminist SF further. In her landmark novel *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1971), LeGuin focuses on a society of androgynous people, using this setting to analyse the concept of gender. These writers broadened the scope of SF and also added new female readers to the predominantly male reading audience.

LeGuin is also one of the authors, along with, for example, her contemporary Philip K. Dick and Polish Stanislaw Lem, who brought some scholarly recognition to written SF: "LeGuin became one of the small band of living SF writers which the steadily growing community of SF academics was keen to promote to the outside world" (James 189). In the late sixties and seventies, the number of university teachers that saw themselves as SF academics and that of serious periodicals dealing with SF grew massively, while SF was also

receiving more respect in universities and from literary critics (Scholes and Rabkin 71). SF was emerging "on the fringes of academia" (James 189).

As had happened before, however, these positive developments in SF were mirrored by other developments which were altogether negative for the image of the genre. James argues that SF became an element of popular culture in the late sixties and seventies; in music, where Pink Floyd went into "Interstellar Overdrive" and David Bowie sang of the cruel fate of Major Tom before moving on to Ziggy Stardust; in TV series like *Star Trek* (1966-1969); and, more importantly, in film (James 191). Hollywood had more and more access to spectacular special effects and used this to capitalise on the rising popularity of SF (partly also caused by contemporary developments like the moon landing) by producing SF films, the most influential of which was the first *Star Wars* trilogy (1977, 1980, 1983), which ignited "an enormous popular engagement with SF" (Roberts 84). SF has remained a popular Hollywood genre, which is proven by the fact that many of the "top-grossing films of all-time are science fictional: the four *Star Wars* films, *ET*, *Jurassic Park*, the *Terminator* films, the *Alien* sequence and *Independence Day* have all made hundreds of millions of dollars" (Roberts 84). This is a list made in 2000: in the meantime, two other *Star Wars* films (2002, 2005) and *Alien*-prequel *Prometheus* (2012) have also been successful, *Star Wars: The Phantom Menace* and *Jurassic Park* have re-appeared in cinemas in 3D in 2012 and 2013, while *Avatar* (2009) has become the top-grossing film of all time ("Avatar").

While this development has certainly created a larger audience for SF, it has not necessarily improved its image. Some of these films were mature in their treatment of the genre: *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) was one of the first films to feature groundbreaking new special effects, but it is at the same time an intriguing and well-crafted film (possibly helped by the fact that renowned SF writer Arthur C. Clarke co-wrote the script). At the same time, films like the *Star Wars* trilogy only reinforced negative stereotypes existing around SF. *Star Wars* is truly a space opera like those of the thirties, filled with scientific inaccuracies (spaceships making sounds in outer space), packed with action scenes, cute robots, terrifying monsters and even the occasional scantily clad damsel in distress (who, truth must be told, does manage to strangle the terrifying monster herself: but this minor feminist touch is about the only advancement *Star Wars* made upon traditional pulp SF).

From the late seventies onwards, literary SF has always had to co-exist uneasily with the more popular branch of SF, represented mainly by Hollywood movies but also by pulpy paperbacks. While its classic themes and tropes had already been established by then, new technological and social developments have continued to impact the shape of SF. One

important development is that of the subgenre of cyberpunk. In the late seventies and early eighties, less qualitatively sound SF was being produced (Levy 72). A new boost was needed for SF, and it came with cyberpunk. SF retained its close connection to developments in science, and in the eighties it was mostly concerned with cybernetics, AI and the idea of cyberspace. Cyberpunk combined these elements with "down and dirty punk attitudes with a literary aesthetic borrowed, at least in part, from Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett, and *film noir*" (Levy 73). Its most important writer is William Gibson, whose 1984 *Neuromancer* is considered one of SF's highlights. The heydays of this particular genre were over in the nineties, but works are still produced, sometimes with more emphasis on the punk, sometimes with more emphasis on the cyber aspects.

Cyberpunk is only one example of the different subgenres that enrich SF. While the basics have been more or less solid since the Golden Age, SF writers constantly find different ways to treat traditional subjects. The classic theme of the alternative history, for example, was infused with new life in the nineties through steampunk, a subgenre of stories "set in an alternative version of Victorian London" (James 206) which focus on "that era's more eccentric and disreputable features" (78). Those stories, of which Bruce Sterling and Williams Gibson's *The Difference Engine* (1990) is the most important work, speculate on what the Victorian world would have looked like if scientific developments had come slightly earlier, for example, or work out a universe in which "various incorrect or even crackpot scientific ideas of the 19th century — the concept of the ether or the hollow Earth — turned out to be true" (Levy 78). In this, they are not always serious, but more often satirical in their intent. Sometimes steampunk is merely concerned with interesting and exciting speculation, as is the case in its incorporations in film (ranging from *Wild Wild West* (1999) to elements of the recent film adaptations of Sherlock Holmes (2009, 2011)), comics and even artistic styles, clothing fashion and subcultures that are found mainly on the internet. In many respects, steampunk is typical of SF: it shows the wide range of subject and settings available to SF (even within its classic framework) and also the popularity new directions of SF often attain (which then, usually, help re-establish classic prejudices against SF).

This division within SF, between the pulpy but popular side and the more serious side, has been there from the beginnings of the genre. On the one hand, SF has always had to struggle to attain literary recognition because of the negative image the pulp has created. At the same time, however, it is precisely the pulp that has also helped the genre find an audience and develop from a very marginal genre into a mainstream one. Many critics compare the environment SF developed in to a "pulp SF ghetto" (Stableford 41), which may have been

looked down upon by most but which did provide the "ideal environment" (Stableford 41) for the slow maturation of the genre. After SF matured, however, it has always had trouble coming out of the ghetto. A writer like Margaret Atwood sometimes writes in the SF tradition, especially with her award-winning *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), but refuses to be called an SF writer, fearing the negative influence of the ghetto on both sales and literary recognition (James 5).

It is difficult to predict what direction SF is going in nowadays, since such trends are usually more easily identified afterwards. At the moment, SF is a very rich genre, which might have a very one-dimensional image, but actually consists of all kinds of subgenres, some of which are more serious and literary in tone than others. Hard SF remains marginal in the literary field and only manages to gain mainstream recognition in its other incorporations, such as film (*Avatar* is certainly hard SF and still managed to become the highest-grossing film of all time) but also in young adult novels, mainly with Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* trilogy (2008, 2009, 2010), a dystopian SF critique of reality TV. Novels which (subtly) incorporate SF elements, however, have managed to gain the praise of literary critics and even some prizes. Cormac McCarthy's 2006 *The Road* is essentially a post-apocalyptic tale, but did manage to win the 2007 Pulitzer Prize. Kazuo Ishiguro's dystopian *Never Let Me Go* (2005) and Jane Rogers' post-apocalyptic *The Testament of Jessie Lamb* (2011) were both shortlisted for the Arthur C. Clarke Award for best SF novel (Rogers also won it) as well as for the Man Booker Prize. However, it cannot simply be concluded from this that SF is now finally making its way into literary circles. James rightly notes that "SF writers have ... predicted recently that SF was at last on the verge of being accepted by literary critics; this has been predicted for over thirty years now, without showing any signs of becoming true" (202). Whether that step will now (or ever) be made remains the subject of future speculation.

3. Monsters and Models: the Poetics and the Literary Value of Science Fiction

The literary value of SF has often been questioned, as I have shown in the previous chapter. In this chapter I will analyse the genre and point out the elements that support SF's claim to literary status. Giving a definition of SF as a genre is challenging, however, and to decide whether or not SF can be called literature also requires a discussion of literary theory. In order to do this, I will first explore the poetics of the genre of SF as a whole, and then compare it to contemporary views on what constitutes literature. My discussion of the poetics of SF will follow three of its most important critics: Robert Scholes, Darko Suvin and Damien Broderick. I will use their theories to establish how SF works and what its most important characteristics are. In order to keep literary theory to a relevant minimum, I will then compare the poetics of SF to some general views of literature as described by Jonathan Culler (since it is not within my scope to present a detailed discussion of different literary theories) and draw some parallels between SF and what is commonly called literature.

It should be noted that all the SF critics I mention are of the opinion that SF is indeed a literary genre. That does not mean that all SF should be seen as literature; but as I have shown in the previous chapter, there has always been a minority of serious SF, and that is the focus of most SF critics. Still, the poetics discussed here will also apply to those SF works not considered literature, be it in a different form. Robert Scholes at some point tries to exclude all non-intellectual works from SF, but that would place most of SF outside of the genre. Most critics stress that the way in which SF's conventions are worked out are vital in determining the quality of SF. Therefore, the models proposed by the critics might focus on high quality SF, but lower quality SF usually follows those same models, be it in a less capable and less interesting way.

3.1 The Future of Fiction: Robert Scholes's Structural Fabulation

I will start with Robert Scholes, an important critic in SF's search for literary recognition and one of the first to speak positively of SF as a (literary) genre. In his 1975 *Structural Fabulations*, he discusses the future of fiction, which, according to him, lies in the so-called future-fiction, or "what we loosely call 'science fiction'" (ix). As Edward James rightly notes, Scholes's work must be seen "within the context of a polemic inspired by his vision of what was wrong with contemporary literature in 1975" (101). Indeed, Scholes himself admits that

his text is "polemical — some would say too much so" (ix). His ideas are at times not so much a description, but rather a polemic against contemporary realism and "a prescription for the future development of future-fiction" (James 102). Still, Scholes does manage to lay a foundation for further investigation of SF.

Scholes assigns fiction two characteristic functions: sublimation and cognition. Fiction can be used for transporting its readers out of this world and relieving their anxiety; sublimation, or at its worst, escapism. This remains the basic appeal of most fiction: the fact that readers are immersed in the story. Another function is that of cognition, the way in which fiction helps us understand ourselves and the world around us (5). Scholes then divides fiction into two major groups, based on the relation of fiction to reality: "novels and romances" (28) which corresponds to "realism and fantasy" (28). Fantastic fiction has always been regarded less highly, since its focus on sublimation often leads to escapist fiction. On the other hand, the idea that realistic novels, based on cognition and on understanding the empirical world, are truly mirror images of this world has since long been rejected as "the realistic fallacy" (Scholes 6). Rather, even the most realistic fiction is always slightly different from reality and provides "us with models that reveal the nature of reality by their very failure to coincide with it" (Scholes 7).

The most interesting form of fiction, according to Scholes, is fabulation. This type of fiction unites sublimation and cognition. Like fantasy and romance, its starting point is "a radical discontinuity between its world and the world of ordinary human experience" (Scholes 28). However, this type of fiction, like realistic fiction, also "returns deliberately to confront reality" (29), thereby fulfilling the function of cognition: it exploits the "radical discontinuity" (Scholes 29) between the fictional and the real world in order to explore aspects of that reality. This fabulation can then be divided into two types: dogmatic and speculative fabulation. Dante's *Divina Commedia* is an example of dogmatic fabulation: it operates via "a closed, anti-speculative system of belief" (Scholes 30), in this case religion. The other branch is speculative fabulation, "[b]orn of humanism" (Scholes 31) and "fostered by science" (Scholes 31), where intellectual speculation is allowed. Thomas More's *Utopia* is a typical example: it speculates about a new socio-political system.

Further developments in science have changed speculative fabulation into structural fabulation. Scientific developments caused a paradigm shift, from a more dogmatic, religious view of the world and its future to a scientifically based, open view. Consequently,

[i]n works of structural fabulation the tradition of speculative fiction is modified by an awareness of the nature of the universe as a system of systems,

a structure of structures, and the insights of the past century of science are accepted as fictional points of departure. Yet structural fabulation is neither scientific in its methods nor a substitute for actual science. It is a fictional exploration of human situations made perceptible by the implications of recent science. (Scholes 41-2)

Scholes emphasises the strong link between science and structural fabulation: the "radical discontinuity" (Scholes 29) between the fictional and the real world this type of fiction exploits is always scientifically based. However, Scholes also reminds us that structural fabulation is not itself science: science is used as a starting point, but from there, the fiction is wholly speculative.

While this element of cognition is of great importance to structural fabulation, or science fiction, sublimation is also an important part of it. The speculative nature of SF presupposes a crucial difference between the fictional and the real world, which is precisely what causes the element of sublimation. SF readers are transported to other worlds, and in the worst, escapist cases remain there; in the better works, however, they return to confront reality. This sublimative element, Scholes argues, fills the gap left by traditional fiction, which started to abandon "the pleasure of narrative movement for the cares of psychological and social analysis" (39). That gap was first filled by "lesser forms" (39), like fantasy and the detective novel, which in turn left readers dissatisfied because they were "starving their need for intellection". Then came a type of fiction that satisfied both the need for sublimation and for cognition: structural fabulation/science fiction. Scholes admits that not all SF lives up to that standard: "if a writer transports men to Mars merely to tell a cowboy story, he produces not structural fabulation, but star dreck" (Scholes 43), which only satisfies the need for sublimation (E.R. Burroughs's *Barsoom* series comes to mind). However,

in the most admirable of structural fabulations, a radical discontinuity between the fictional world and our own provides both the means of narrative suspense and of speculation. In the perfect structural fabulation idea and story are so wedded as to afford us simultaneously the greatest pleasures that fiction provides: sublimation and cognition. (Scholes 44)

Scholes's plea for structural fabulation is not without its faults. In a sense, he is too polemical and rarely focuses on what defines SF, being more intent on proving that imaginative works of structural fabulation, rather than those of stale realism, are the future of literature. Moreover, Scholes focuses only on the top layer of works: he denies many works of SF their status as SF stories because they lack an intellectual edge. The pulps of the twenties

and thirties and contemporary novels inspired by those texts might not be high quality SF, but to exclude them from the genre altogether is a step too far. Still, Scholes does provide some parameters of SF, a basis for further examination. He stresses the importance of the cognitive aspect in SF, claiming that speculation and confronting reality through speculation is the main characteristic of SF. We shall look further into this notion with the theories of Darko Suvin. Furthermore, Scholes also notes that science fiction is in essence a popular genre that can always pride itself on its attractive narratives. Further on, I will explore how Damien Broderick expands upon this idea of SF as a popular genre.

3.2 The Basics of SF: Darko Suvin

First I will discuss Darko Suvin, perhaps the most influential of all SF critics. His 1979 *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* is a landmark text in SF theory, and its main concepts still form the basis of much SF criticism today. Like Scholes, Suvin states that the main characteristic of SF is the fact that its "*locus and/or dramatis personae ... (1) are radically or at least significantly different from the empirical times, places and characters of 'mimetic' or 'naturalist' fiction*" (Suvin vii)². Suvin adds that those new elements are "nonetheless — to the extent that SF differs from other 'fantastic' genres, that is, ensembles of fictional tales without empirical validation — simultaneously perceived as *not impossible* within the cognitive (cosmological and anthropological) norms of the author's epoch" (viii). More so than Scholes, who also emphasised the popular, narrative attractions of SF, Suvin emphasises the (pseudo)scientific nature of SF and the way the play between two effects of SF, estrangement and cognition, works to generate meaning.

Before further explaining those two effects, I will first introduce the most important term Suvin added to SF criticism: the novum. Suvin states that "[a] novum of cognitive innovation is a totalizing phenomenon or relationship deviating from the author's and implied reader's norm of reality" (64). In other words, the novum is what creates the radical difference between the fictional world and the empirical world. This difference is crucial in any SF tale, be it pulp or literary SF, so Suvin can rightly claim that "*SF is distinguished by the narrative dominance or hegemony of a fictional 'novum' (novelty, innovation) validated by cognitive logic*" (63). While Suvin admits that all works of literature feature some type of difference, he claims that the novum differs by being "'totalizing' in the sense that it entails a change of the whole universe of the tale, or at least of crucially important aspects thereof (and that it is

² Suvin frequently uses italics in his book: all italics are his, unless indicated otherwise.

therefore a means by which the whole tale can be analytically grasped)" (Suvin 64).

First of all, the novum brings about a totalising change. It can be an invention, like Jules Verne's *Nautilus* or H.G. Wells's Time Machine, which drastically change man's ability to travel in space and time, respectively. However, it can also be a change in the social, economic or political structures of the world: Orwell's totalitarian state, where the Party and Big Brother have ultimate control, or Joanna Russ's planet *Whileaway*, a human colony where the men have been wiped out by a disease, leaving only the women, are both good examples of a novum that concerns setting. Usually, SF novels are structured around a central novum but include many more less important ones, often connected to the central novum. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, for example, the telescreen, Newspeak and the Thought Police are all novums. Novums are also the details that can bring SF stories to life: Robert Silverberg's casual mentioning of his main character moving through future Chicago on the "slidewalk" (16) is one of the details that makes his future Earth come alive. Novums range from "the minimum of one discrete new 'invention' (gadget, technique, phenomenon, relationship) to the maximum of a setting (spatiotemporal locus) and agent (main character or characters)" (Suvin 64).

The other important aspect of the novum is that it "is postulated on and validated by the ... scientific *method*" (Suvin 65). Suvin emphasises that the novum cannot be something fantastic or supernatural, but has to have a scientific basis. This is important with respect to SF's tension between estrangement and cognition. So while in *The Lord of the Rings*, the corrupting power of Sauron's Ring and the magic of Gandalf are certainly universe-changing elements, they cannot be termed novums because of their fantastic nature: they move the story out of the speculative into the supernatural. In order for serious speculation to work, an SF tale needs to create certain boundaries for itself inside of which it can function. It needs to adhere to the rules and limits of what Suvin calls an "'ideal possibility', meaning any conceptual or thinkable possibility the premises and/or consequences of which are not internally contradictory" (66). Like Scholes, Suvin recognises SF's urge for speculation and thought experiment via a coherent story, but "[a]ny tale based on a metaphysical wish-dream — for example omnipotence — is 'ideally impossible' as a coherent narration (can an omnipotent being create a stone it will not be able to lift? and so forth)" (Suvin 66). In other words, fantastic as SF stories might seem, they always need to retain a close connection to the empirical world, especially with concerns to cognitive logic, in order to become coherent and effective speculative stories.

However, this does not mean that SF must be "primarily a matter of scientific facts or

even hypotheses" (Suvin 65). SF does not necessarily need to comply with Hugo Gernsback's ideas of education through fiction. Science and technology are not SF's goal, but its structure. As Roberts puts it, the novums and changes must be "made plausible within the structure of the text. This means that the premise of an SF novel requires material, physical rationalisation, rather than a supernatural or arbitrary one" (Roberts 5). Plausible, however, does not mean possible: even things that scientists today claim to be impossible, like time travel and faster-than-light travel, have become common SF elements. This is possible within SF because writers are "providing rationalisations of these impossible activities in terms that *sound like* scientific discourse" (Roberts 9). Some critics therefore prefer to say that SF is based on a *pseudo*-scientific discourse: the emphasis is not (only) on possibilities and consequences of scientifically plausible changes, but on all possibilities and their consequences within a coherent universe that avoids self-contradiction (Roberts 9). Importantly, that coherent fictional universe is in some way related to the empirical world; it is through this connection that the fictional speculation can be related to the reader's own world.

This concept of the novum is very useful in distinguishing SF from other genres, even when several stories seem to tell the same type of tale. For example, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) is often seen as one of the first SF stories. Indeed, it has a novum (the creation of the monster) and that novum is (pseudo)scientifically validated: Frankenstein is a scientist who takes scientific developments like galvanisation one step further and tries to recreate a human being, with disastrous consequences. Because the creation of the monster is scientifically explained, the text is able to function as a speculative text that explores both the dangers of science and the responsibility of the scientist.

Other stories that feature (the creation of) monsters but cannot be called SF all differ in some way. H.P. Lovecraft's 1928 "The Dunwich Horror" is also about a monster, but this monster is created by supernatural means, as can be seen in one character's instructions to his son: "Open up the gates to Yog-Sothoth with the long chant that ye'll find on page 751 *of the complete edition*, an then put a match to the prison. Fire from airth can't burn it nohaow. ... Only them from beyont kin make it multiply an' work. Only them, the old uns as wants to come back" (Lovecraft 188-189). This lack of scientific grounding prevents the story from having any speculative value. Discussions about the possible danger of ancient incantations are not nearly as fruitful as discussions on the ethics of science.

Arthur Conan Doyle's "The Hound of the Baskervilles" also features a seemingly supernatural monster: "Fire burst from its open mouth, its eyes glowed with a smouldering

glare, its muzzle and hackles and dewlap were outlined in flickering flame" (Conan Doyle 291). However, after killing it, Sherlock Holmes provides the scientific explanation: "Phosphorus. A cunning preparation of it" (Conan Doyle 292). While the scientific aspect is present here, the story lacks the radical change a novum brings about: "the cyclical detective tale" (Suvin 79) always returns the fictional world to the state in which it began. Any speculation is undone by the typical rounding-up of detective stories, where any anxieties or speculative thoughts the readers might have had are laid to rest by an ultimate effort of reason-based explanation.

Lastly, Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* also comes close to SF: it centres on Dr. Jekyll, who can turn into the monstrous Mr. Hyde by taking some sort of chemical concoction only he can prepare. Science in this story helps the battle between good and evil "take on bodily form" (Suvin 69). However, "Hyde also begins 'returning' without any chemical stimulus, by force of desire and habit" (Suvin 69). Science is only "used for partial justification or added alibi" (Suvin 69) for those readers who are not willing to accept a full-blown moral allegory, but Stevenson's fictional world does not abide by its own scientific laws and therefore cannot be called SF.

I have demonstrated the difference between these stories at length, because the prejudice against SF often causes all these stories to be thrown onto one big pile of science fiction, fantasy and horror, while SF is actually markedly different from those genres. The most important consequence of this difference is that SF might seem like a supernatural genre, but, within its imaginative framework, actually functions more like a realistic genre. This opens up possibilities for SF to rise above mere space monster/space ship escapist fiction to a more serious, literary, speculative fiction (the structural fabulation Scholes argued for). I will explore this specific type of speculation further with the help of Suvin's model of the poetics of SF based on the tension between estrangement and cognition.

Suvin argues that "*SF, then, is a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment*" (Suvin 7-8). Like Scholes, Suvin recognises SF's potential for estrangement, or (the perhaps more appropriate term in this context) alienation. Rather than just being a literary device, estrangement "has grown into the *formal framework* of the genre" (Suvin 7). This is also true for other types of fiction, like the fairy tale and the myth. However, SF is also characterised by cognition, "the process of acquiring knowledge and reason" (James 108). Unlike myth, which deals in absolutes, SF stimulates the reader's intellect by offering enquiry (James 108).

SF stories might be alienating, but they are always governed by certain laws and rules, extrapolated from those of the author's world, and readers are encouraged to explore for themselves how these fictional universes function. It should be noted here that science does not only refer to the hard (natural) sciences, but also to the historical and cultural sciences. The cognitive aspect of SF, then, means that SF as a genre is focused on speculation in all these areas, so not only on the possibility of interstellar travel but also on "possible new social systems or new forms of science" (James 108). This element, and the skill with which it is worked out, are defining elements of quality SF: "*a cognitive - in most cases strictly scientific — element becomes a measure of aesthetic quality, of the specific pleasure to be sought in SF*" (Suvin 15). To return to the concept of the novum: SF is the fictional exploration of the change brought about by the novum, balancing estrangement and cognition. As Tom Shippey simplifies it: "estrangement means recognising the novum: cognition means making sense of it" (13).

For example, George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is estranging in the sense that it presents its reader with an image of London completely alien to them: the novum is that the whole of England, or rather "Airstrip One" (Orwell 8), has become a mere extension of the totalitarian super state Oceania. This change is certainly totalising: Orwell's world is completely different from the world the reader knows. However Orwell's exploration of the politics of this state allows the readers to understand the structure of the state and grasp its close relation to that of totalitarian regimes of that time, such as Soviet communism. This starts the process of cognition: the reader follows Orwell in his thought experiment, collecting the pieces of the puzzle that lead him to understand the workings of the totalitarian super state, which is in turn a speculation on the dangers of real-world totalitarianism.

It is important to note that everything in Orwell's novel abides by its own rules. It might seem paradoxical, for example, that the super state of Oceania is constantly fighting a money- and labour-consuming war with the two other super states, even though there do not appear to be any ideological differences between them and each of the three states has such a large territory that they already have all the resources they need for their economies. Orwell explains, however, that the war is artificially kept going as a means of using up economic surplus "without raising the general standard of living" (166) and for the sake of creating an external enemy. The main reason why *Nineteen Eighty-Four* has become such a critically acclaimed thought experiment is that it allows for its cognitive puzzle, embedded within an imaginative and estranging framework, to be solved in such a way that it provides fruitful insight into political developments.

Another element of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* that is often praised is its creative use of language: the Party aims to implement Newspeak, a very minimalist language suited specifically to the needs of the Party. By banning words like "freedom" and "uprising" from language altogether, they are trying to erase those very ideas from the people's minds. Through their control over language, they are trying to exert their control over even the last bastion of freedom the people still have: their minds. This exploration of language is also made possible by the SF setting: a totalitarian state with that much power exists only in speculation. These examples show how proper use of SF's framework can produce a work widely acknowledged as literature. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is not widely acknowledged as SF, however. The subgenre of dystopian fiction is a sort of niche in the literary circles: it is the only form of SF widely accepted, as long as it is not called SF but something like "dystopian fiction" or "speculative fiction". I will return to this discussion in my analysis of Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, which is similar, in this respect, to *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

Suvin's concepts can be used to discern between low quality pulp SF and high quality SF that aspires to become literature. The skill with which the elements of estrangement and cognition are combined is vital in determining the quality of a work. Suvin does not see Jules Verne as literary SF, for example, but more as popular science (22-23). Verne's works definitely embrace the element of cognition, but in such a way that they become mere "technological extrapolation" (Suvin 23), the didactic SF Gernsback envisioned. Those works are hybrids, which are "neither good fiction nor interesting science" (Suvin 23). On the other hand, other SF leaves out the cognitive element, using science "merely to explain away the supernatural by reassigning it to natural science" (Suvin 23) and regresses into fairy tales where "science is treated as metaphysical and not physical, supernatural and not natural activity, gobbledygook instead of rational procedure" (Suvin 23). E.R. Burroughs's *Barsoom* series is again a good example here, since it is basically a fairy tale with the Mars setting as an excuse for an exotic environment.

While SF authors may explore the deep reaches of space and time, Suvin emphasises that the stories always retain a close link to reality. The novums writers use are always historical, since they are always based on a degree of difference with the empirical world: therefore, their meaning depends on their relation to the actual world. Furthermore, the quality of a novum must "be judged by how much new insight into imaginary but coherent and this-worldly, that is, *historical*, relationships it affords and could afford" (Suvin 81). In other words, novums are to be judged by their "*degree of relevance*" (Suvin 81): there is a difference between the "*possible*" (Suvin 81) and the "*necessary*" (Suvin 81). The fact that an

SF writer can incorporate everything from distant alien planets to world-changing scientific discoveries in his works (the possible) does not automatically mean that those works then contain some useful reflection on our own world (the necessary). In other words, high quality SF explores only those reaches of space and time that are of relevance to human society and its future, rather than those where the largest space monsters lurk. This leads to "the conclusion that significant SF is in fact a specifically roundabout way of commenting on the author's collective context — often resulting in a surprisingly concrete and sharp-sighted comment at that. ... The escape is, in all such significant SF, one to a better vantage point from which to comprehend the human relations around the author" (Suvin 84).

In the above example of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* the novum is certainly one with relevance, considering the onset of the Cold War and the developments of the expanding totalitarian Soviet Union in 1949. However, in a sense it also confirms the prejudice that SF is always based on such radical changes as the introduction of new races and planets or a new world order. Other stories introduce less radical changes, which might not allow for a speculation on the same scope as a utopian novel, but still constitute unique thought experiments. One example is Daniel Keyes's 1959 short story "Flowers for Algernon" (later made into a novel), a critically acclaimed SF work that has as its novum the technique of artificially improving man's intelligence. This technique is still being tested, so the reader follows the story through the progress reports (a sort of diary) of test subject Charlie Gordon, whose IQ rises from 68 to over 200. The reader follows his entries from the start of the experiment, where his low IQ is represented by the lack of proper spelling and grammar in his "progris riports" (Keyes) and his inability to grasp what is happening around him. The reader follows Gordon for several months, all the way up to where he has become smarter than the professors involved in the experiment, and back down to his original IQ (the technique is flawed). The idea of artificially increased intelligence might at first be estranging for a reader, but this is the only change between the reader's own world and Keyes's fictional world, which follows the rules of the pseudo-scientific discourse at all times. When the reader has become familiarised with the radical difference, he can start looking for the connection to the empirical world.

Among other things, this story provides Keyes with a unique vantage point from which to explore the treatment of the mentally disabled. In a moving passage, Keyes describes how Gordon interacts with his friends. Gordon's low IQ prevents him from seeing what the readers do see: that Gordon's so-called friends are only making fun of him and appear to have no genuine feelings of friendship. As his intelligence increases, Gordon realises that he has

always been treated either with outright cruelty (by his co-workers) or condescendingly (by the professors), but never as an equal, a human being. However, the reader sees that Gordon himself unconsciously starts treating his intellectual inferiors (which, in the end, include everyone) condescendingly, which comes as a shock to Gordon when he realises it himself. As he joins others in laughing at the clumsiness of a mentally disabled dishwashing boy, he suddenly screams: "But for God's sake . . . he's still a human being!" (Keyes). He ponders: "How strange it is that people of honest feelings and sensibility, who would not take advantage of a man born without arms or legs or eyes — how such people think nothing of abusing a man born with low intelligence" (Keyes). Keyes explores the treatment of the mentally disabled and the natural urge of intelligent people to assert their superiority over others. The unique character of Gordon, who has experience of being both mentally disabled and highly intelligent, provides Keyes with a unique vantage point from which to explore these matters.

3.3 From Pulp to Popular: Damien Broderick and the Mega-text of SF

Damien Broderick has defined some other interesting characteristics of SF. Most importantly, he argues that "sf is written in a sort of code ... which must be learned by apprenticeship" (xiii). While most genres, according to Broderick, operate via some kind of code, "the coding of each individual sf text depends importantly on access to an unusually concentrated 'encyclopaedia' — a mega-text of imaginary worlds, tropes, tools lexicons, even grammatical innovations borrowed from other textualities" (Broderick xiii). Within this definition, Broderick also refers to an aspect that Scholes referred to earlier: that of SF as a popular genre. As I will show, this encyclopaedic mega-text consists of both a relatively unknown (except to SF readers) part of purely SF-related elements and a more accessible part which includes all kinds of popular icons that are used in the work in some way.

Broderick starts by claiming that reading SF is an experience which readers with no background in the field might find unnerving. In explaining why this is, he identifies the specific code SF writes in, which sets it apart from other genres but which also increases the threshold for non-SF readers. For example, "[n]ear-future dystopias, the closest most literary readers (and writers) ever get to sf, sharply rein in their lexical inventiveness, reflecting the impoverished worlds they guardedly deploy. More buoyant futures put out luxuriantly flowered tendrils, and so prove alarming" (Broderick 15). Broderick claims that "to the unapprenticed reader, even the finest sf seems unnecessarily cluttered with stray or forced items of information" (13). Even though quality sf manages to "blend exposition of unfamiliar

backgrounds with a seamless diegesis" (Broderick), it still requires knowledge of a specific code to effectively read SF.

First of all, Broderick claims that one element of this code is the way SF plays with language, which shows that one of SF's characteristics is "its capacity — indeed, its dynamic need — for linguistic play and innovation" (40). He is referring to that fact that SF texts often include many lexical words which bear no relation to anything outside either the text in question, the body of texts to which it belongs, or the field of SF. Often these lexical terms are the novums of the novel. For example, the opening of Orson Scott Card's "Ender's Game" (1977) uses 'to flash' in a strange way: "Ender flashed the stragglers, and they dangled, helplessly frozen, while the others laughed" (Card). The word flash is a signifier with a clear signified outside of this story, but it does not seem to have the same meaning here. In the course of the story, the readers learn that 'to flash someone' means stunning someone in the training environment the main characters are in. This meaning is specific to this story, however: in another SF novel the signifier "to flash" could refer to the same signified as in realistic novels, or to something completely different. The short story has its own set of signs which is mostly similar to, but in some aspects radically different from, standard sets of signs.

This also happens on a larger scale. For example, in Isaac Asimov's 1978 "Bicentennial Man", in one of the first paragraphs, a robot surgeon says to his patient: "The First Law, concerning my duty to human safety, would take precedence over the Second Law relating to obedience" (Asimov 2). Experienced SF readers will know that these terms refer to Asimov's famous "Three Laws of Robotics", which were introduced almost forty years earlier in his 1942 short story "Runaround" and have been present in many of his later works. This knowledge is essential to understanding this sentence, since the Laws are invoked without further explanation, as casually as a more realistic writer could refer to the laws of gravity. In his works, Asimov has built his own lexicon, and this includes the signifieds for signifiers like "First Law", which lacks a signified outside Asimov's work.

The same can be said of SF as a whole: the term hyperspace, for example, is nowadays starting to develop a signified in the context of the internet, but it has been a signified for SF since the forties, carrying two important definitions. First of all, SF readers know that travelling through hyperspace is a method of travelling faster-than-light. This is a necessary element of much SF, since extended space travel by conventional means is practically impossible because of the time span involved. However, science has practically ruled out the possibility of faster-than-light travel (James 95), so readers will also know that hyperspace is a concept they will just have to accept rather than see it as part of the cognitive puzzle that the

work constitutes. This information is not unimportant, since it helps the reader focus his attention on the novums that matter rather than on the impossible but practically necessary concept of hyperspace. In time, these signifiers can create a real-world signified for themselves: the word 'robot', for example, was first introduced by SF writer Karel Čapek in his 1921 *R.U.R.* and has risen from a term specific to the lexicon of that work to one that has a real-world referent which has become common usage.

Broderick takes this idea even further, by claiming that all SF works refer to a so-called "mega-text" (57) which incorporates, but is not limited to, its linguistic play with signs. He has borrowed and adapted this term from Christine Brooke-Rose, who used it to describe the workings of fantasy texts. One instance of a mega-text is in *The Lord of the Rings*, a trilogy which has extensive background information on the universe the stories take place in. Tolkien infused Middle-Earth with life by writing its history, drawing its geography and even inventing some of its languages. All this combined can be called a mega-text: the source in which many signifiers in the trilogy find their signifieds. Likewise, Broderick claims, SF as a whole also has a mega-text. The entire genre of SF (not only books, but also films, for example) draws on "imaginary worlds, tropes, tools, lexicons, even grammatical innovations" (Broderick xiii) and icons that are stored in an imaginary encyclopaedia of SF "built up over fifty years, even a century, of mutually imbricated SF texts" (59). Each new work of SF brings its own new concepts and is embedded in "an even vaster web of interpenetrating semantics and tropic given vectors" (Broderick 59). In some ways this is similar to the concept of intertextuality, but in a form in which it is specific to one single genre.

That does not mean, however, that all SF texts handle the same subjects in the same way. Well-known SF icons like the UFO and the robot, for example, do not have "a single, univocal conventional weight or meaning even within a generic time-frame or publishing regime" (Broderick 60). In one paragraph, Broderick lists eight different depictions of robots, from the soulless and bloodthirsty dangers of the pulps to the man-robot hybrids of cyberpunk (60). Its meaning is not fixed, but a "vast range of connotations hang in generic space above or behind its manifestation in a given text, drawn together by association and practice into certain most-probable-use vectors" (Broderick 61).

This technique provides the genre of SF with the stability it lacks in other areas. Unlike other genres, SF has neither a fixed time nor a place; not even the race of its protagonists is fixed. By constantly re-using the elements of the mega-text in different ways, transformations and combinations of the favorite images of the genre become like variations on a theme, with writers working from a relatively

limited number of consensual images to create a vast and complex body of fiction that nevertheless often rests upon the assumption of reader familiarity with the fundamental icons of the genre. (Wolfe, qtd. in Broderick 60)

These new signifiers have an estranging effect at first, but experienced readers will be able to recognise those elements from the SF tradition. Quality SF, then, goes one step further, by creatively exploring the familiar elements of the genre and presenting them in new, unfamiliar ways, thus estranging the readers from what they considered familiar. The more experience a reader has in the field of SF, the easier it will be for him to understand the new signs the SF text is creating. More importantly, those readers will also be better at recognising the new ways in which SF explores its themes by their familiarity with the mega-text of the genre. For the "capable but inexperienced reader" (Broderick 63), it will be more difficult to find a foothold in the confusing new worlds of SF works, but also to appreciate the way in which the text manages to once again defamiliarise the familiar aspects of SF; they will sometimes be unable "to retrieve/construct anything like the full semiotic density of a given text" (Broderick 63). This is only true, however, for that part of the mega-text concerned with the SF-specific elements: later on, I will return to the more popular elements that also make up part of the mega-text.

First, I will illustrate the use of the SF-specific elements by giving some examples from SF texts. One classic element of SF is the alien abduction: many stories have been written and films have been made about aliens kidnapping unsuspecting humans for experiments or to take them away to alien planets. The phenomenon has even extended itself outside the field of SF, since it has nowadays even become common for people to claim they have been abducted and to tell their stories on Discovery Channel's *Alien Abduction*.

This specific trope has been used multiple times in feminist SF, for example in James Tiptree Jr.'s "The Women Men Don't See" (1973). In this short story, the protagonist Don Fenton is in a plane with male pilot Esteban and Ruth and Althea Parsons, mother and daughter, when it crashes near the Bolivian coast. Knowing his stereotypes, Fenton immediately aims to assume the leading role as a white male. During the story, however, he becomes increasingly frustrated when the women, especially Ruth, do not behave like the damsels in distress he expects them to be. When Don and Ruth set out together to find fresh water, he injures himself and has to watch helplessly as she assumes the role of the male. He cannot make sense of this: Don is not able to understand women outside of the roles he envisions for them (as "Mother Hen" (Tiptree), notably), and Ruth's refusal to take on this role

makes him see her as alien: "End of communication. Mrs. Ruth Parsons isn't even living in the same world with me" (Tiptree).

This increasing tension between the two reaches its climax when they encounter a UFO and its alien crew (after all, it is an SF story). Ruth refuses to hide behind Don and his gun, but approaches the aliens instead. Don takes aim and shoots, hitting Ruth, supposedly by accident, but it marks their definitive separation: "She's as alien as they" (Tiptree), Don thinks. However, Ruth apparently thinks the same about Don, for when he tries to warn her to stay away from the aliens, she says "I'm used to it" (Tiptree). In a twist on the classic alien abduction story, the women then choose to leave the Earth with the aliens, seeing it as an opportunity to escape the male-dominated world, which is as alien to them as the actual extraterrestrials. Don, however, remains unable to grasp the women's look on the world until the end, wondering how they could choose to live "among unknown monsters" (Tiptree), oblivious of the fact that he himself is, in Ruth's eyes, one of those monsters.

This short story functions mainly by upsetting narrative elements from traditional SF. Whereas a traditional SF story will make a clear distinction between the alien and the human, in this story all three groups (men, women and aliens) can be called alien, depending on the viewpoints of the different characters. Interestingly, the actual aliens, usually the terrifying antagonists of the story, are only fleetingly described and have a marginal role. Rather, all attention is given to presenting one of the genders as alien. A close reading will reveal that while Tiptree appears to be setting up the women as alien, this is only because of the prejudiced viewpoint of the male protagonist; she is actually making the sexist, dominant male with no empathic ability the alien monster of the story. The dramatic finale is the defamiliarisation of the classic trope of alien abduction, which usually confirms the superiority of the alien over the helpless human abductee. Rather, Ruth concludes her ongoing process of role-reversal and taking control by turning the abduction into an act of free will, establishing her superiority over the males, the real aliens of "The Women Men Don't See". It is precisely this final twist that will have the reader pondering the meaning of the story, since the familiar image of the alien abduction as something terrifying and dangerous is so strong that Ruth's choice is incomprehensible and certainly unfamiliar, though only at first sight.

A slightly different example can be found in Joanna Russ's "When it Changed" (1973). In this short story, the novum is the planet Whileaway, a colony where a plague has killed all the men and where women have been living without male interference for over six hundred years. The reader does not know this from the start, however: the novel starts with that typical SF trope of the alien landing and first contact. The newcomers are described as aliens, all in

accordance with SF cliché: "They are bigger and broader. Two were taller than me, and I am extremely tall, 1m 80cm in my bare feet. They are obviously of our species but off, indescribably off, and my eyes could not and still cannot quite comprehend the lines of those alien bodies" (Russ).

The reader is now familiarised with the plot: alien encounter. However, the conversation between the protagonists and the newcomers starts the process of defamiliarisation: the reader finds out that Whileaway is populated by women, while the supposed aliens are merely men, who have come to talk about bringing men back to Whileaway. While the reader has now discovered that the aliens are actually men, the women start seeing them more and more as aliens, as the men slowly start reinstating their superiority, insinuating that men are going to come to Whileaway no matter what the women think of it. Already, one of the women claims that the men "made me, if only for a moment, feel small" (Russ). In the end, they have to resign themselves to the idea that men are coming back: "All good things must come to an end" (Russ). In the end, the men, who are undoubtedly human, have taken on the traditional role of the all-powerful alien invader. Russ is using this familiar SF convention in order to explore the way women experience their relation to men.

Broderick's concept of the mega-text can also be connected to another characteristic of SF: that of being a popular genre. While Suvin focused mainly on the workings of the (pseudo)science in SF, Scholes stressed the idea of SF as a popular genre. Scholes claims this is mainly because of the exciting and imaginative ideas that fill SF stories (the element of sublimation), which can be used to reach a wider audience than the regular readers of literature, if at least the stories also have an interesting intellectual aspect (Scholes 44). So Scholes's SF ideal is the combination of two different branches I have identified in SF's history in the previous chapter: its pulpy popular appeal and its serious, (pseudo)-scientifically based speculative side.

SF's popular side is often only mentioned negatively, being accused of giving quality SF the bad name that condemns it to the ghetto of the pulps. Yet in the previous chapter I have also shown that this side was vitally important in SF's struggle to become an established genre with a large audience. It would therefore be unfair to deny this aspect of SF its proper respect. While Scholes is right in asserting that without the intellectual speculation, SF has no hopes of aspiring to literary status, even he cannot deny that many of its readers are (at least in the first place) attracted by the highly imaginative ideas and the exciting new locations, settings and characters that characterise SF. In the previous chapter, all the examples of works that have been called proto-SF, from the 1818 *Frankenstein* all the way back to Roman writer

Lucian, show that many critics think that before SF existed as a genre, stories with a similar appeal were already there, speaking to "something more durable, perhaps something fundamental in the human make-up, some human desire to imagine other worlds than the one we actually inhabit" (Roberts 48). They claim that SF's appeal is partly based on the attractive power of the sublime, on "an approach to the relationship between mankind and the world" (James 103) that is characterised by a sense of wonder.

Indeed, that is why many critics see the Romantic and the Gothic as the progenitors of SF (James 103). The idea of the sublime "came to special prominence in the Romantic era" (James 104), while the Gothic "appealed to the human desire for awe and mystery in a world in which religion had largely been stripped of those qualities" (James 105). It is true that this desire for awe and mystery, this longing for a sense of wonder, forms the basis for SF as a genre. As James puts it, "[w]e have here the suggestion that sf is more about providing a particular kind of emotional fulfilment than, as Gernsback might have hoped, about inspiring us to invent a better kind of portable generator" (102). This is slightly exaggerated, but James is right in pointing out that for all its scientific speculation, the simple pleasures that imaginative SF provides its readers with are also an important factor in its success. "Science fiction's appeal lies in its combination of the rational, the believable, with the miraculous. It is an appeal to the sense of wonder" (Hartwell, qtd. James 105).

To illustrate this statement, one only has to look at the SF short story that is usually "at, or near, the top of readers' (and writers') polls for the best sf short story ever written" (James 121): Isaac Asimov's "Nightfall" (1941). The novum in this story is the planet Lagash, which, because of its six suns, never experiences the dark. With the one eclipse the planet experiences every two and a half centuries approaching, a group of scientists believe, on the basis of ancient texts, that the darkness and the appearance of so-called "stars" will drive the people of Lagash mad. Fact is that the most dramatic consequence of the novum is that the people of Lagash have never seen the universe, and while they are quite advanced (they have universities and elaborate astronomy) they believe they are the shining centre of the universe. When night finally falls with the eclipse, the stars unveil themselves to the completely unprepared people of Lagash: "Lagash was in the center of a giant cluster. Thirty-thousand mighty suns shone down in a soul-searching splendor that was more frighteningly cold in its awful indifference than the bitter wind that shivered across the cold, horrible bleak world" (Asimov 20). James remarks that the Lagashians are driven mad by "a pure expression of the classic 'sense of wonder'" (123), the same sense that also strikes the reader. Like many other writers, Asimov emphasises the vastness and indifference of the infinite universe, unknowable

to man, an idea which might be terrifying, but remains one of the pleasures of SF.

SF is not only a popular genre because of its appeal to awe and wonder, but also because of its use of the popular part of the mega-text. SF stories often contain many references to popular icons known outside the field of SF readers. The Statue of Liberty, for example, has become a staple of SF works, especially in its ruined form. Mainstream SF films from *Planet of the Apes* (1968) to *The Day after Tomorrow* (2004) and *Cloverfield* (2008) often include an image of the Statue under attack by whatever some external threat (hyper-intelligent apes, abrupt climate change or a Godzilla-style monster, respectively) to emphasise that the whole of America is being attacked, and sometimes, as with *The Day After Tomorrow*, end with an image of the Statue still standing defiantly at the end of the film. The symbolic meaning of this will be clear to anyone: America is victorious!

Writers, like Norman Spinrad in his Nebula-award winning 1973 "A Thing of Beauty", can then twist this popular trope. In this story, an American company is prepared to sell the ruins of the Statue to the new dominant superpower, Japan, represented by businessman Ito who is looking for an American artefact to enshrine in Japan. The American salesman sees the Statue as nothing more than "one more piece of old junk left over from the glorious days that the Japanese, who were nuts for such rubbish, might be persuaded to pay through the nose for the dubious privilege of carting away" (Spinrad), while Ito actually refuses to buy the Statue because of its symbolic meaning, thinking that buying this symbol of American freedom and values and enshrining it in a foreign land would be an insult to America.. Interestingly, the meaning of the popular icon is twisted: Spinrad is not claiming that the Japanese are the external enemy threatening America by the symbolic attack on the Statue, but that those who are supposed to care for it, the Americans who have let it fall into decay and are even willing to sell it, and their attitude towards it are the main threats to America.

This one example of how the mega-text uses not only SF-specific elements, but popular icons too, which is an important factor in SF's popular appeal. Moreover, some of the more SF-related elements of the mega-text have made or are slowly making their way into popular culture as well: the boundaries between the two are vague. The aforementioned plot device of the alien abduction or alien invasion might have SF as its roots, but is certainly not only known within SF circles. It has inspired all kinds of appearances in popular culture, from commercials and programmes on the Discovery Channel like *Alien Abduction* to "semi-religious flying-saucer cults" (James 106). Likewise, the word "robot" was first used in an SF novel, but this word (and what it refers too) has by now become such a widely used term that most people will not even be aware of its SF origins.

While SF's close connection to popular culture is often seen as a disadvantage, it does provide the genre with the possibility of reaching a wider audience through its ability to integrate popular culture into its works. Mere repetition of these elements will then give an SF work "a wearying sense of déjà vu" (Roberts 15), fantastic as it may be. Yet quality SF can use the familiarity of popular icons to create and then subvert certain patterns of expectations: as I have shown above, Russ and Tiptree both use the expectation that the narrative element of the alien encounter creates in a creative way, and I will demonstrate later on that even a can of Coca Cola, with all its popular connotations, can be of crucial importance in a work like Cormac McCarthy's dystopian *The Road*.

3.4 SF versus Literature

The models I have discussed above have become some of the most important in SF theory. Most critics nowadays have, be it with slight modifications, to large extent accepted many of the terms mentioned here. It is interesting to compare this to a general overview of the properties of literature by Jonathan Culler in order to see that some parallels can be drawn between quality SF and what is commonly called literature. Culler (who never mentions SF in his work) consciously refrains from giving one definition of literature: he warns us that giving a simple definition, or even one defining characteristic, has been attempted by many theorists "without notable success" (20). He therefore chooses to examine various properties that are often attributed to literature, without one claiming superiority over the other.

First of all, Culler mentions a factor that is of particular importance to SF: the relativist view that literature is a label rather than a set of characteristics, and that literature is first and foremost "a set of texts that cultural arbiters recognize as belonging to literature" (22). He admits that this is a "completely unsatisfying conclusion" (22), but there is some truth to it. Depending on how a work is presented, it can or cannot "attract a certain kind of attention we call literary" (24). Those works, famous works or new works by famous authors, are presented to their readers in a specific context, which "gives us reason to expect that the results of our reading efforts will be 'worth it'" (Culler 27) and thereby encourage us to engage differently with the work, often in a more active way than usual.

The problem of SF is that it is usually denied this context: as I have described in the previous chapter, SF has always struggled to escape from the pulpy ghetto in which it was formed. Most ordinary (non-SF) readers will find their views predetermined by the legacies of pulp SF and Hollywood blockbusters and might not expect to find anything of merit in SF, so that they do not approach SF with an open mind, if they approach it at all. SF is not helped, in

that respect, by its heavy reliance on its genre-specific code (Broderick's mega-text), a certain knowledge of which is necessary to fully appreciate SF. Also, the inclusion of many elements of popular culture within that mega-text only emphasises the close connection SF has to popular culture. As Scholes and others have shown, the appeal of SF's imaginative and sense-of-wonder inducing narratives should be seen as an advantage of the genre; in this case, however, SF's popular aspect is a disadvantage in that it can strengthen the prejudice that SF consists of nothing more than this popular side.

Culler then moves on to try and find some properties of literature that will offer some more insight into it than the relativist view. First of all, he mentions that literature often pays specific attention to language and that it is "the organization of language that makes literature distinguishable from language used for other purposes" (28). Literature can be conscious of the linguistic structures it uses, for example, but literature is also very much a sort of language in itself, where sound and meaning, form and content are intertwined and all the "various elements and components of the text are brought into a complex relation" (Culler 29). This can be combined with the idea of literature as an aesthetic object: literature as a work of art, in which language, for example, also has an aesthetic function (Culler 32).

At first sight, these categories do not seem to apply to SF. SF has always been a literature of ideas, rather than one of style. Isaac Asimov might be one of the most important writers of the field, but Scholes and Rabkin openly admit that while his ideas are very interesting, "his style is at best serviceable" (62). Broderick even claims that a "de-emphasis on 'fine writing'" (157) is characteristic of SF, which functions in a different manner but thereby "fails to meet tests of literary credential" (157). Some critics argue that SF does not lend itself very well to aesthetic experiments with style, since the fantastic ideas it deals with need "to be balanced by a certain mundaneness in content and style. A plain, functional style may serve usefully to offset the estranging power of the SF novum" (Roberts 21).

This is largely true: SF usually focuses on its ideas rather than its style. There are exceptions, of course, such as "Flowers for Algernon", where Keyes varies his writing style in accordance with the development of the main character, but they form a minority. However, Broderick has also shown that SF experiments linguistically in a different way: via its introduction of new signifiers and its creation of alternate lexicons. In fact, SF has even been able to change our language, introducing new words like 'robot' and 'hyperspace' into it. So while SF might not be known for its aesthetic treatment of language, it certainly does foreground language in an important way.

Literature as an aesthetic object is not only defined by its use of language. Roberts

admits that "[i]t is hard to deny that many SF texts are limited and narrow if judged by the aesthetic criteria sometimes applied to other literatures: that their characterisation is often thin, their style dull and unadventurous, their plots hackneyed" (14). James stresses the problem with this first criterium, characterisation, "which has been enough to damn sf as far as traditional literary criticism is concerned: mainstream fiction is generally concerned with the personalities of individuals and the development of character, whereas sf is often concerned more with the individual as representative of humanity as a whole" (97). Furthermore, Roberts rightly claims that most SF draws on a limited number of tropes, and that "[a] body of literature built on so narrow a base runs the risk of becoming repetitive and crude in practice" (15).

It is indeed true that, when judged by traditional literary criteria, SF will often be found lacking. However, just as Culler argued that a certain attitude is important in approaching and appreciating literature, SF literature also requires a certain attitude in order to fully appreciate it. As I have shown, in SF "[t]he emphasis is on difference, and the systematic working out of the consequences of a difference or differences, of a novum or nova, becomes the strength of the mode" (Roberts 7). The aesthetic quality of SF lies in whether or not it can successfully and interestingly make use of the stock elements of the genre. The novum, as Suvin noted, can be judged by examining its relevance, while the SF text as a whole needs to find the precarious balance between estrangement and cognition that defines quality SF. Estrangement in itself is a literary technique that is part of the aesthetic criteria with which to judge literature. In SF, however, estrangement is no longer one technique, but the framework of the entire genre.

As I have shown in my discussion of the mega-text, another aesthetic element of SF is the way in which it can use familiar tropes and techniques from the mega-text in order to generate new meaning. Like the example of Russ and Tiptree, quality SF can use the (over)familiarity of its reader with these elements creatively by creating and upsetting certain expectations. The same can be said of its close connection to popular culture: this gives the genre access to all sorts of tropes and icons which can strengthen the impact of the work, if used correctly. This aspect of SF can be linked to the literary concept of intertextuality, which Culler also sees as one of the defining characteristics of literature (33).

Lastly, Culler mentions the possible "social and political functions" (35). Literary works are often supposed to have some kind of relevance to society. Literature is a place for social criticism, a place where "ideology is exposed, revealed as something that can be questioned" (Culler 38), for example. An important aspect of literature is its "universality"

(36): it often eludes one single meaning but rather provides food for thought. A parallel can certainly be drawn to SF here: the whole genre is based on a difference between the fictional world and the real world and the thought experiment in which the consequences of such a change are worked out. Because it has some kind of scientific aspect at its core, SF always retains its close link to reality, and within its fictional universe functions very much like more realistic novels. SF is the ideal place for thought experiments about possible future developments in science and/or society, and its century-long existence has certainly given its readers much to think about.

To conclude, quality SF does seem to have certain literary characteristics. Its foregrounding of language, its emphasis on intertextuality within the genre, subverting genre conventions and popular icons, and its value as speculative fiction are examples of that. It could be argued that SF is too narrow and repetitive to be called literary, since it is based on a specific formula and constantly draws from a limited number of premises. However, it can also be said that 'literature', as a term, is too broad, since it can include a realistic work like *Madame Bovary* but also Orwell's dystopian future-fiction *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. SF, then, can be seen as one specific area of literature, which might operate within certain set parameters, but finds its literary value in its constant creative and interesting treatment of its stock elements.

4. "The King was Pregnant": *The Left Hand of Darkness* and Gender

Ursula LeGuin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* is one of the most renowned SF novels: it has won both a Hugo and a Nebula Award in 1970 and is often hailed by critics as one of the most interesting thought experiments in the field. The novel, set on the alien planet Winter (or Gethen, in its own language) is about a range of subjects: it is a "travel narrative, pastiche of myth, straight SF, Orwellian dystopia, adventure story, and multi-racial ... love story" (Lefanu 138). The most important theme is that of gender: *The Left Hand of Darkness* describes a society of androgynous people. LeGuin has claimed that this only makes up half of the book, the "lesser half" ("Gender" 167³), even, but according to Lefanu it is this "lesser half that constitutes the book's wide appeal" (139). Providing layered social critique is one of the characteristics of literature, as I have shown in the previous chapter, so I will focus here only on the way in which LeGuin uses SF's framework to produce a well thought-out work of gender criticism.

The Left Hand of Darkness is set on Gethen, a planet with a climate of extreme cold and eternal winter. It tells the story of Genly Ai, a man from Terra (in all respects similar to a normal man) and ambassador for the Ekumen, an intergalactic institution which aims to increase and facilitate contact and trade between different planets. As the first Envoy, he is sent to the planet on his own in order to persuade its inhabitants to join the Ekumen. After spending two years in Karhide, a semi-feudal monarchy, he travels to Gethen's other superpower, Orogeyn, a totalitarian-type state, complete with secret police and Siberian style prison camps. The other protagonist is Estraven, Karhide's Prime Minister, who is exiled from Karhide for treason during the novel (for his role in promoting Genly's cause) by the paranoid king Agraven. When Genly, who is often used as a pawn in both national and international politics, is interned in a prison camp, Estraven rescues him and together they undertake a long and perilous journey across the ice plateau of the Gobrin Ice towards Karhide, which through some political shift has come to favour Genly's cause and, in the end, agrees to join the Ekumen.

As a novum, the alien planet differs in many respect from Earth, but the gender aspect is the most interesting: all the inhabitants of Gethen are similar to humans, except that they are all genderless hermaphrodites. For only a couple of days every month, the so-called period of *kemmer*, the Gethenians feel a strong sexual impulse. Only if they meet with another

³ All references to LeGuin will be to *The Left Hand of Darkness*, unless otherwise indicated (as is the case here)

Gethenian in *kemmer* do they go on to the next stage of *kemmer*:

Hormonal secretion is further stimulated until in one partner either a male or female dominance is established. The genitals engorge or shrink accordingly... Normal individuals have no predisposition to either sexual role in *kemmer*: they do not know whether they will become the male or the female, and have no choice in the matter. (LeGuin 73)

If they have sexual intercourse, the female can become pregnant, staying female until the children have been delivered before turning androgynous again. After that, gender remains unfixed, and "the mother of several children may be the father of several more" (LeGuin 74).

Suvin's model of cognitive estrangement is clearly visible in LeGuin's descriptions of Gethen. Keulen notes as much, stating that "LeGuin ... took great pains in creating a logically coherent world. Thus the glacial epoch, its seasons, climate and meteorological peculiarities are scientifically explained by an elliptical orbit, the planet's tilt and the meteorological laws of air currents which are all based on empirical science" (34). Her careful description of *kemmer* provides the background to the gender novum and the "scientific coherence of Gethenian physiology, including Karhidish special terminology" (34) make Gethen a logically sound world. Because LeGuin presents the society as a coherent system similar to our own society, the social changes of genderlessness can be worked out logically and can be compared to the reader's own world. In this comparison, LeGuin's world can function as a "direct commentary on our own" (Keulen 35). The planet and its people are alien, but also similar to our Earth in many ways; "[t]hus, estrangement and cognition interact as simultaneous responses of the reader and incites him/her to look at Gethen as if it were a mirror of the Earth" (Keulen 35).

Interesting conclusions can be drawn from a comparison between the two worlds. In Gethen, where the people vary between being genderless, male and female, "sexual stereotyping is not only merely irrelevant but impossible" (Scholes and Rabkin 227). The heterosexual male Genly "is the alien in this situation" (Scholes and Rabkin 227) and he indeed has troubles adjusting his world view to that of the Gethenians. For example, chapter five opens with: "My landlady, a voluble man" (LeGuin 38). This already is estranging for the reader: it is difficult to fathom how a lady can also be a man, even though Genly has seemingly been able to accept this, since he mentions it so casually. It turns out that this is not so, however: "I thought of him as my landlady, for he had fat buttocks that waggled as he walks, and a soft fat face, and a prying, spying, ignoble nature. ... He was so feminine in looks that I once asked him how many children he had. He looked glum. He had never born any. He

had, however, sired four" (LeGuin 39). Here, LeGuin shows how natural it is for people to fall back on gender stereotypes. Even after living for some time in Gethen and being aware of the absence of gender, Genly still judges the world around him by falling back on Earthly gender divisions.

The most worrying aspect of this behaviour is that it shows Genly's tendencies towards sexism. Apparently, for him a "prying, spying ignoble nature" (LeGuin 39) is characteristic of women. Likewise, king Agraven is portrayed as very masculine in the first chapter, where he shows his importance in a parade in Karhide's capital. In this parade, "full of pomp and the rituals of power, all is described in terms of the 'male' gender: king, men, lords, mayors and so on" (Roberts 113). When Genly sees the paranoid king close up at court, however, his view changes: "Agraven was less kingly, less manly, than he looked at a distance among his courtiers. ... He laughed shrilly like an angry woman pretending to be amused" (LeGuin 25). His negative characteristics are described in female terms: "[w]ithin the first few chapters, the narrator ... has set up a pattern of good/bad, male/female binarisms" (Roberts 113). LeGuin tries to show that her readers, too, have the tendency to make similar judgements: for example, one of her favourite sentences, "The king was pregnant" (LeGuin 80), will have an estranging effect on most readers. Roberts claims that this is not merely because our (male) kings can never be pregnant, but also "because a 'king' is an icon of masculine power, and it somehow diminishes our conception of that power to imagine it subject to the physical change of pregnancy" (109).

In the course of the novel, LeGuin tries to expose and undermine these prejudices. Genly's travel from Karhide and to Orogeyn and then back again with Estraven is not only a physical journey, but a mental journey too. Especially in his interaction with Estraven, Genly is forced to recognise the limits of his gender-based world view. In the tent they share during their journey across the Gobrin Ice, Genly is at a loss to describe women to Estraven when the Gethenian asks whether women constitute 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 factor in one's life, is whether one's born male or female. In most societies it determines one's expectations, activities, outlook, ethics, manners — almost everything. Vocabulary. Semiotic usages. Clothing. Even food. Women ... women tend to eat less. Even where women participate equally with men in the society, they still after all do all the childbearing, and so most of the child-rearing.'

'Equality is not the general rule, then. Are they mentally inferior?'

(LeGuin 191)

This is a very telling paragraph. Genly's attempt at distinguishing women from men is laughable, since the only real difference he can come up with apart from women's ability to bear children is that they eat less than men. At the same time, he does recognise that being born male or female almost completely determines someone's future and that women are not treated equally. It is all the more painful, then, that he cannot give any reasons for this inequality. Estraven draws the only logical conclusion he can, asking if the mental inferiority of women is the cause of this inequality. This is somewhat embarrassing for Genly (and with him for the readers) who has to admit that this is not so. Yet the alien perspective shows that women are treated as if they actually are mentally inferior: this is a good example of SF using its unique vantage point to confront its readers with the shortcomings of their own world.

In the end, Genly has to admit to Estraven that to him, "women are more alien than you" (LeGuin 191). In their time on the ice, Genly manages to understand Estraven better; he is much helped by the fact that Estraven goes into *kemmer* and responds to Genly's masculinity by taking on the female role. There is even some romantic tension there, and, as Roberts argues, "one of the beauties of this is that we are left uncertain about whether to read the unconsummated love between Genly and Estraven as heterosexual or homosexual" (113-114). Those labels are no longer sufficient, as Genly himself also realises: "And then I saw again, and for good, what I had always been afraid to see, and had pretended not see in him: that he was a woman as well as a man. Any need to explain the sources of that fear vanished with the fear: what I was left with, at last, was an acceptance of him as he was" (LeGuin 202).

LeGuin emphasises that there is a fear that goes with letting go of stereotypes. In a report from an Investigator, someone from the Ekumen who was secretly sent before the Envoy to gather information about Gethen, this Investigator writes:

The First Mobile, if he is sent, must be warned that unless he is very self-assured, or senile, his pride will suffer. A man wants his virility regarded, a woman wants her femininity appreciated, however indirect and subtle the indications of regard and appreciation. On Winter they will not exist. One is judged only as a human being. It is an appalling experience. (LeGuin 77)

A genderless world does not, at first, feel as a liberation; rather, the first experience of races that do know gender, like the Terrans, is one of anxiety and fear of losing the fundamentals on which they have built their identity. LeGuin shows that our reliance on these stereotypes goes deeper than we might think, claiming we could not even stand the experience of being regarded "only as a human being" (LeGuin 77).

In the end, Genly manages to partially set aside his world view based on the binary opposition male/female. It is a shock, then, when his fellow Terrans land on Gethen after it has joined the Ekumen. Rather than constituting a return to normality, Genly experiences the return of his own species as the typical SF element of the alien landing as LeGuin cleverly twists this trope:

But they all looked strange to me, men and women, well as I knew them. Their voices sounded strange: too deep, too shrill. They were like a troupe of great, strange animals, of two different species: great apes with intelligent eyes, all of them in rut, in kemmer... (LeGuin 241)

For Genly, the normal situation where gender does exist has become alien: the return of sharp binary oppositions (like deep/shrill and male/female) leads him to see the two genders as too different species: he has become too used to the Gethenian way of thinking, focused on unity rather than difference. He even describes members of his own race with a term borrowed from the Gethenians: *kemmer*. For a large part, Genly has managed to adopt the Gethenian world view, which, in combination with the power of the inverted alien-landing trope, provides LeGuin with the opportunity to present what her readers find normal as something alien.

Other connections of *The Left Hand of Darkness's* world to the real world support this theme of gender criticism. A good example is LeGuin's introduction of the novum *shifgrethor*, a confusing and abstract concept which refers to the rules and norms determining social conduct on Gethen: "*shifgrethor* — prestige, face, place, the pride-relationship, the untranslatable and all-important principle of social authority in Karhide and all civilisations on Gethen" (LeGuin 11). Throughout the novel, *shifgrethor* remains crucial in all Genly's interactions with Gethenians, but he never really manages to grasp it; it always remains alien. When he is talking to a Gethenian, Genly muses that "the fuss he was making would either have degraded his *shifgrethor* or insulted mine; I wasn't sure which, but it would have done one or the other — practically everything did" (LeGuin 96). The reader can do nothing but accept the confusion around the term.

When Genly and Estraven are alone on the Ice, the alien concept returns, but in a different context now. When Estraven is commanding Genly, thereby ignoring Genly's masculinity, Genly realises that

[h]e had not meant to patronize. He had thought me sick, and sick men take orders. He was frank and accepted a reciprocal frankness that I might not be able to supply. He, after all, had no standards of manliness, of virility, to complicate his pride.

On the other hand, if he could lower all his standards of *shifgrethor*, as I realized he had done with me, perhaps I could dispense with the more competitive elements of my masculine self-respect, which he certainly understood as little as I understood *shifgrethor*.... (LeGuin 178)

Indeed, human interaction based on gender is just as untranslatable and alien to the Gethenians as their *shifgrethor* is to humans. Readers who had come to see *shifgrethor* as a very specific and perhaps even silly construct are now forced to recognise that the same goes for gender.

LeGuin also confronts her readers with the strangeness of their world by articulating the opinions of the aliens on humans. While the readers might be puzzled by the fact that the strange and unclear *shifgrethor* controls everything in Gethen, from individual interaction to international politics, the Gethenians themselves cannot comprehend the fact that humans are always, as they call it, in *kemmer*. On Gethen, on the days of each month when a Gethenian goes into *kemmer*, "the sexual impulse is tremendously strong, controlling the entire personality, subjecting all other drives to its imperative" (LeGuin 75) and consequently the Gethenians are allowed to withdraw from society during that period: "no one, whatever his position, is obliged or forced to work when in *kemmer*" (LeGuin 75). A minority of Gethenians is permanently in *kemmer* (just like the Earth has a minority of hermaphrodites), but these are called perverts: "They are not excluded from society, but they are tolerated with some disdain, as homosexuals are in many bisexual societies" (LeGuin 50). Genly is also seen as a pervert, and many of the Gethenians he meets wonder how a society of perverts, where everybody is constantly in *kemmer* and thus constantly under the influence of a sexual drive, can even function. Genly eventually takes over this world view, which explains his negative attitude towards the humans landing on Gethen: "great apes with intelligent eyes, all of them in rut, in *kemmer*" (LeGuin 241). LeGuin tries to let her readers, too, look critically at the possible influence of sexual frustration on our own society.

Even though *The Left Hand of Darkness* has received much praise, there are critics, especially from the field of feminist criticism, who claim that LeGuin's novel is still too male-dominated: "Le Guin has been faulted for this novel's consistent, male-orientated use of the generic 'he' to describe the biologically androgynous inhabitants of Gethen and for her description of these characters solely within the traditionally male spheres of politics and physical adventure" (Rosinsky 31-32). This is partly because the story is largely told from the male perspective of Genly, but there is a deeper flaw in *The Left Hand*. The novel is at its strongest when the tension between the male and female side of the Gethenians is emphasised

(for example, when Estraven and Genly cross the ice and Estraven goes into *kemmer*) but these moments are scarce. LeGuin herself admits that she has not succeeded completely and that in most of the novel "the Gethenians seem like *men*, instead of menwomen" ("Gender" 167-168). LeGuin later regretted not showing

the 'female' component of Gethenian characters in *action*. Unfortunately, the plot and structure that arose as I worked the book out cast the Gethenian protagonist, Estraven, almost exclusively into roles which we are culturally conditioned to perceive as 'male' — a prime minister ..., a political schemer, a fugitive, a prison breaker, a sledge hauler One does not see Estraven as a mother, with his children, in any role which we automatically perceive as 'female': and therefore, we tend to see him as a man. This is a real flaw in the book. (LeGuin 168).

For all its flaws, however, *The Left Hand of Darkness* remains an interesting thought experiment, and the fact that it has raised this discussion within the field of SF about the (in)ability to present a genderless world can also be seen as a positive achievement.

Whether its thought experiment functions perfectly or not, *The Left Hand of Darkness* is in any case exemplary of how the framework of SF can produce an interesting, engaging novel. Like in all good SF, LeGuin's novums change her fictional world in dramatic ways, while a close connection between this fictional world and the empirical world remains. She has managed to convincingly build an entire new world, with its own peculiar people, customs, folk tales and even religion which at the same time in many ways mirrors our own world and confronts its readers through these mirror images. Furthermore, the SF tropes that are subverted, most importantly those of the alien encounter and landing, in which the reader is continually forced to see Genly and the Terrans (i.e. Earth men) as alien, are also qualities that distinguish this novel from other works. The main strength of the novel is its social relevance: with respect to that, *The Left Hand of Darkness* is an excellent example of how SF can produce a literary work.

5. The Best of Both Worlds:

Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* as a Literary Work of SF

There are only a few examples of novels accepted as SF by the field that have also gained mainstream critical acclaim, but Margaret Atwood's 1985 *The Handmaid's Tale* is certainly one of them. Not only did the novel win the Arthur C. Clarke Award and was it nominated for the Nebula Award, it was also shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize. One of the explanations for this unusual success in both fields is that the book belongs to the most widely accepted subgenre of SF: the dystopian tale. It can be placed in the tradition of Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and Huxley's *Brave New World*, probably the most successful works of SF. Like those works, however, *The Handmaid's Tale* at times resists the label SF, as Atwood herself stated in an article in *The Guardian*:

I like to make a distinction between science fiction proper and speculative fiction. For me, the science fiction label belongs on books with things in them that we can't yet do, such as going through a wormhole in space to another universe; and speculative fiction means a work that employs the means already to hand, such as DNA identification and credit cards, and that takes place on Planet Earth.⁴

However, Atwood might resist being labelled an SF writer and prefer the vague "speculative fiction", possibly out of commercial concerns, but as I will show, she does use the framework of the genre as the basic structure of her novel, and with more success than most who do admit to writing SF, too. First I will focus on the complexity of her dystopian society, which she uses to voice her criticism on a variety of subjects. It is important to note that, like many works of literature, she also focuses on the psychological side of her characters, proving the claim that characterisation is always flat in SF false. After that, I will discuss Atwood's exploration of language, certainly a literary theme and one often discussed in dystopian novels. Lastly, I will show how *The Handmaid's Tale* uses intertextual connections to place itself firmly in the SF tradition of dystopian literature.

The Handmaid's Tale is set in the Republic of Gilead, a theocratic totalitarian state on the soil of what was once the US. The Republic is a fairly new one, only five years old: by analysing various hints, like the age of the protagonist and her mother, Templin estimates that the year must be around 2025 (255). Atwood presents a near-future vision in which

⁴ All further references to Atwood refer to the novel rather than this essay.

contemporary concerns are extrapolated. One of those concerns was infertility, and indeed, the power shift that led to the creation of Gilead (one novum) was caused by an increasing infertility rate (another novum): most men and women have become infertile (pollution, some of it radioactive, is to blame), and this has led to the rise of a patriarchal, totalitarian state where procreation is regulated by the state. Everyone in the state has a role: men are employed mainly as soldiers, security and spies (Angels, Guardians and Eyes) and the Commanders form a ruling elite, while women are supposed to give birth and raise children. Handmaids such as the protagonist are supposed to get pregnant (this is attempted regularly in a completely de-mystified and de-romanticised kind of sexual intercourse with a Commander called the Ceremony), Wives will then raise the children as their own while Aunts, finally, are the paramilitary group of women charged with keeping order in the households and re-educating women by teaching them the values of Gilead. Failure to comply with the rules or, for the Handmaids, failure to become pregnant, will lead to deportation to the colonies, where they are employed in lethal work such as cleaning up radioactive trash.

The story revolves around Offred: of-Fred, a Handmaid to a Commander called Fred. The reader follows her in her daily life in Gilead, which for her consists only in staying healthy and trying to become pregnant. Her accounts of daily life are interspersed with flashbacks to times before Gilead, when she lived with her husband Luke and their daughter, and to other periods during its rule, where she describes, for example, her time at the re-education centre. The plot itself describes how the Commander secretly meets with Offred from time to time (a crime punishable by death for Offred: she is only allowed to see the Commander during the Ceremony) and invites her to play Scrabble and read some forbidden books and magazines (women are not allowed to read in Gilead). There is no love there, however: the Commander is merely bored with his Wife and uses his Handmaids as diversions. Offred also secretly strikes up a (mainly sexual) relation with Nick, the Commander's chauffeur. She is approached by a fellow Handmaid who forms part of a resistance movement, but this girl is quickly found out and eliminated. It then seems like the Guardians are coming to arrest Offred too, but before the men arrive, Nick seeks her out and asks her to believe him that he too is part of the resistance and that the arrest is actually a rescue operation. Whether or not this is true Atwood does not say; the story ends with Offred stepping in the van.

Interestingly, the story is followed by an epilogue, the Historical Notes, which describes the proceedings of a convention of historians in 2195: in it, the reader learns that the story he has just read is the careful reconstruction of some tapes found after the fall of Gilead.

Gilead has fallen decades ago, and these historians are attempting to reconstruct its history, with *The Handmaid's Tale* as one of their primary sources. The epilogue consists mainly of the speech of Professor Pieixoto, in which he discusses the very emotional story of Offred and the Republic of Gilead in an impersonal and academic manner, focusing mainly on the identity of the anonymous Commander.

The play between estrangement and recognition is very obvious in Atwood's story. The reader is constantly confronted with strange terms, new customs and a completely new society; it takes the reader the entire novel, including the epilogue, to find out how this Republic works and what exactly its many connections to the real world are. The first few chapters are especially estranging since they provide the reader with very little background information, but as the novel progresses the flashbacks help paint the picture of this totalitarian theocracy and its history. With some effort the reader can reconstruct a coherent image of a society that is "one possible extension of the real world of 1984" (Neuman 859).

The fact that this novel is very much an extension of the real world (of the 1980's) must be emphasised, and Atwood has often done that herself; she even had a file with articles and newspaper clippings on issues such as infertility and women's rights that "she took with her on book tours as evidence for her insistence that she had 'invented nothing' in Gilead" (Neuman 859). Indeed, like all effective SF, *The Handmaid's Tale* is closely connected to the real world; while many critics focus on its feminist aspect, one of the strong points of the novel is actually that it combines several worrying tendencies of the 1980's into a convincing dystopian future. I will briefly discuss some of the most important concerns in *The Handmaid's Tale* to demonstrate how complex and well-crafted her dystopian society is.

First of all, her central novum of extreme infertility, for example, comes from the "scientific obsession in the mid-1980s" (Sullivan 850) with infertility: it was thought that increasing pollution might affect birth rates. This became the basis of her novel, which describes in detail "[w]hat would happen when infertility rates reached epidemic proportions" (Sullivan 850): it would cause major power shifts and spawn a totalitarian state born out of the need for survival. Through the lecture of Pieixoto, Atwood emphasises the urgent and very real character of her warning by referring to Romania, in which Ceausescu's government "monitored women monthly for pregnancy, outlawed birth control, and abortion, and linked women's wages to childbearing" (Neuman 859). *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood emphasises, is a serious consideration of actual problems, rather than scientific hocus-pocus. This might distinguish it from some forms of SF, but does not take away that Atwood uses the basic structures of SF to voice her criticism.

Furthermore, Atwood is critical of the developments in religion and its effect on politics. Several critics have noted that Atwood's choice for Cambridge, Massachusetts as the setting is not coincidental but recalls the strictly religious Puritans, on whose values the Republic of Gilead is based (Sullivan 850). According to Neuman, Atwood thought that a return to the very strict and fundamentalist values of the Puritans could be a likely path for the US government, a fear supported by the fact that US presidents, including Reagan, sometimes used Puritan phrases in discussing America (857). Moreover, there was also "the agenda articulated during the 1980s by America's fundamentalist Christian Right" (Neuman 858), which urged women to stay at home, and the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979 (also mentioned in the epilogue). All these things combined inspired the terrible theocracy of Gilead.

In Gilead politics and religion are inextricably intertwined. The Republic has embraced Puritan and extreme right-wing Christian ideas about gender role (together with some ideas from radical Islam, like heavy veiling) and uses the Bible to invest its political decisions with divine authority. Atwood criticises these ideas by exploring a society which takes those ideas to the extreme. In Gilead, women have become mere breeding machines, as Offred confirms: "We are two-legged wombs, that's all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices" (Atwood 146). Her use of religious imagery already points to the fact that it is all on the apparent authority of the Bible. Certain Biblical texts are constantly repeated (though not in full, or even in altered form, as I will show below) and are used to condone actions the readers might find immoral. For example, the story of Jacob, Rachel and Billah⁵ is used as a justification for the Ceremony, which in fact constitutes organised and structural rape. Atwood also makes the connection to Iran, by describing how the Handmaids are forced to cover themselves completely in veils and keep themselves hidden from men. The women are supposed to prevent men from being aroused, and to do this, as Aunt Lydia instructs them, they have to make themselves invisible: "To be seen — to be *seen* — is to be — her voice trembled — penetrated. What you must be girls, is impenetrable" (Atwood 39).

Atwood gives an extra dimension to her dystopian tale by also exploring the psychological side, showing that such a society cannot be maintained without the people's complacency or even cooperation; this is a good example of a work that uses the SF framework yet avoids the SF cliché of flat or unrealistic characterisation. Offred remembers

⁵ Jacob's second wife Rachel was made infertile by God, so she gave her handmaiden Billah to Jacob in order to have children and then raised the children as her own.

that her mother once said that it is "[t]ruly amazing, what people can get used to, as long as there are a few compensations" (Atwood 283). The context here is that Offred has just started sneaking out to Nick every night. Her situation has not improved much, but suddenly she realises that "[t]he fact is that I no longer want to leave I want to be here, with Nick, where I can get at him. Telling this, I'm ashamed of myself" (Atwood 283). Yet the rebellious spirit seems to have gone out of Offred; she is lulled into complacency. The same complacency seemed to rule when the whole crisis started. One of the first actions the temporary military government took was that it denied women the right to have jobs and hold bank accounts, and they consequently had all their money transferred to husbands or male relatives. There were protests and marches, "[b]ut they were smaller than you might have thought" (Atwood 190). Moreover, Offred's husband Luke reacts very coolly, claiming that everything was going to be alright and that he would take care of her, showing not only complacency but also a hint of patronising sexism. Offred notices this: "He doesn't mind, I thought. He doesn't mind it all. Maybe he even likes it. We are not each other's, any more. Instead, I am his" (Atwood 191).

Beyond complacency, there is collaboration, as is the case with the Wives (who act superior because they have certain privileges) and the Aunts. The Aunts are in charge of re-educating the Handmaidens and keeping them under control, which includes dealing out severe bodily punishment. As Johnson notes, the Commanders only do light duties while the heavy and important work is done by the Aunts (71). Indeed, the Commander comes across as a normal, perhaps even slightly ignorant man, while characters like Aunt Lydia are the real villains of the book. Interestingly, in this male-dominated world, the reader never encounters any cruel men: women, and especially the Aunts, appear to be in control. As Atwood has Pieixoto claim, the Gileadeans thought that

the best and most cost-effective way to control women for reproductive and other purposes was through women themselves. For this there were many historical precedents; in fact, no empire imposed by force or otherwise has ever been without this feature: control of the indigenous by members of their own group. ... When power is scarce, a little bit of it is tempting. (320)

Women are vital in maintaining this male-orientated and male-dominated society; partly, Atwood is criticising the passive attitude women in the 1980's acquired towards feminism, as is visible in the different attitudes between the passive Offred and her actively feminist mother. Moreover, this touch gives Atwood's dystopian state a realistic twist, by transferring the blame for maintaining such a society from an anonymous dystopian state to its individual

people.

While Atwood uses Gilead to warn for the dangerous consequences of certain tendencies in society, she also refuses to portray either the past or the future as a utopia. Neuman claims that "implicit in every dystopia is a utopia" (865) and the most obvious choice here would be the pre-Gilead past, where Offred lived with her husband Luke and their daughter. However, Offred's flashbacks do not paint a bright picture of the past, but one in which sexual violence against women is widespread:

Or you'd remember stories you'd read, in the newspapers, about women who had been found — often women but sometimes they would be men, or children, that was the worst — in ditches or forests or refrigerators in abandoned rented rooms, with their clothes on or off, sexually abused or not; at any rate killed. There were places you didn't want to walk, precautions you took that had to do with locks on the windows and doors, drawing the curtains, leaving on lights. (Atwood 238)

After reading passages like these, readers are almost inclined to believe the Aunts that everything done in Gilead was and is necessary for the protection of women. According to Neuman, this reflects the situation in America in 1984, where, for example, "murders related to sexual assault and domestic violence increased by 160 per cent" (860) compared to 1983 while women's shelters and abortion clinics were shut down and child support was lowered (860); the situation of women was deteriorating in many respects. The lack of enthusiasm for radical feminism mentioned above was another concern for Atwood. Neuman claims that "[t]he implicit women's utopia of *The Handmaid's Tale* is not in 'the time before.' It exists ...outside the novel: outside of the dangers, humiliations, inequities, and backlash that women experience in its 'time before,' but also outside totalitarian Gilead's claims to have improved their lot" (865).

Similarly, the post-Gilead future is no utopia either. Pieixoto's lecture is "an impeccable parody of all that is pompous and self-interested in any conference of academics" (Bergmann 852). The reader has just finished Offred's emotional and personal story, only to be confronted with a man who makes sexist puns about her: the reader learns that the title *The Handmaid's Tale* was chosen by a professor Wade, not only in reference to Chaucer but also to "the archaic vulgar signification of the world *tail* ... (*Laughter, applause*)" (Atwood 313). Moreover, the professor speaks with an unnerving admiration of Gilead and its "genius" (Atwood 319) in creating a totalitarian state. His appeal to his colleagues to refrain from criticising Gilead and avoid "culture-specific" (Atwood 316) judgment is even greeted with

applause.

The male bias is even more visible in the subject of Pieixoto's lecture: it is concerned with his research into the name of the Commander Offred was stationed with (Frederick Waterford). Rather than focus on the emotionally challenging character Offred and her complex text, Pieixoto is only interested in the marginal (but male) character of the Commander, claiming even that he would prefer to have twenty printed pages of the man's computer files as material to work with (Atwood 316). As Andriano rightly asks: "How much worse is it, after all, to call a woman Offred than it is to call her Mrs. Frederick Waterford?"⁶ A more serious sign of his ignorance is that Pieixoto does not know Offred's real name, even though, as Bergmann argues, it can be deduced from a list of names given early on the story that her name is June (853). This will become clear to most re-readers of the book: the fact that Pieixoto does not know it show his bias. Bergman states that "[p]ost-Gilead society is, in other words, depressingly like our own, having accepted a modicum of change and nominal liberation and feeling free, therefore, to be sexist" (852-853). Andriano goes even further, claiming that these academics "ominously reveal that though Gilead is no more, the seeds from which the weed grew are still alive". The absence of extremely conservative gender roles does not ensure a utopia: a positive but radical change in gender roles is required, Atwood seems to say. So Atwood's dystopian tale not only warns of a possible future developments in society, but also of the situation as it is.

As I have concluded in the previous chapter, the foregrounding of language is an important aspect of literature. Atwood certainly explores language in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Most SF tales have some degree of interaction with language, sometimes using new words to describe their novums, but in dystopian stories this interaction is often more speculative and interesting. More often than not, language becomes the battleground for the power struggle between the ruling elite and its subjects, as the dominant side tries to strengthen its hold by controlling language while the subjected side often revolts through creative use of language. The obvious example here is George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, where the state aims to implement Newspeak as a means of controlling even the thoughts of its subjects. The role of language in *The Handmaid's Tale* is not dissimilar: language is power, and it is both used by the Republic of Gilead to assume complete control over its subjects and by Offred as a means of resistance. Atwood uses the new situation created by the SF framework to explore this

⁶ Unfortunately, the page numbers have been lost in transferring this essay to a HTML file and a PDF file is not available, so no page numbers can be given.

power.

Gilead uses language to control its people, since "it knows the power of words" (Andriano). First of all, it has ensured that the ruling elite of Gilead are the only ones with access to language: women, with the exception of the Aunts, are not allowed to read or write. The Bible is of supreme importance, but women are read from it and have to memorise it. They are not allowed to read it themselves: "it was an incendiary device; who knows what we'd make of it, if we even got our hands on it? We can be read to from it, by [the Commander], but we cannot read" (Atwood 98). This explains why Gilead made reading illegal: by refusing women access to language (even to spoken language, as I will explain later), the ruling elite ensures that their claim to the truth cannot be questioned. For example, since women cannot read the Bible, only some are aware of the fact that Gilead is merely using those parts of it that fit its own ideology. Stories that form the basis of Gilead, like that of Jacob and Rachel, are constantly repeated, and the Gileadeans take it even further by actually altering the text of the Bible: "They played it from a disc, the voice was a man's. *Blessed be the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are the merciful. Blessed are the meek. Blessed are the silent*⁷. I knew they made that up, I knew it was wrong, and they left things out too, but there was no way of checking" (Atwood 100). The idea that the meek (i.e. the Handmaids and other dominated women) should someday inherit the Earth is left out, since Gilead has nothing to gain (but only to fear) from offering them hope of such a future. Furthermore, the phrase "*Blessed are the silent*" (Atwood 100) is made up to reinforce the claim of Gilead's rulers that women should always be inconspicuous and silent. Offred, who still has memories of a time before Gilead, remembers that this verse is altered and incomplete, but those who will come after her will not and will have no way of finding out.

Having gained this control over language, Gilead further uses it to divide its population into roles: men are referred to by rank (Commander, Guardian) while women are named according to their role in life (Wife, Handmaid, Aunt): their whole lives will follow the predetermined path that goes with this name. Handmaids even lose their proper names: their names are formed by taking 'of' and then adding the name of the Commander they belong to:

⁷ Adapted from Matthew 5:3-7: "3 Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 4 Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. 5 Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the Earth. 6 Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. 7 Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy."

of + Fred = Offred. In losing their names, the Handmaids lose their personal freedom: all their life they are forced to play a (submissive) role in society. This role is made even more restrictive by Gilead's attempts to prevent creative use of language in conversation. The Aunts constantly echo phrases from the Bible: when talking about the Wives, Aunt Lydia says: "Try to pity them. Forgive them, for they do not know what they do" (Atwood 56), reminiscent of Jesus' words on the Cross. Conversation between Handmaidens, like that between Ofglen and Offred, moreover, is cast in ready-made phrases: "'Blessed be the fruit,' she says to me, the accepted greeting among us. 'May the Lord open,' I answer, the accepted response" (Atwood 29).

Gilead also uses language to set certain groups apart from society in order to persecute them. Black people are given a name from the Bible (Children of Ham), which not only allows Gilead to separate them from society more easily, but also provides them with an apparently Biblical pretext to do so. In a nod to Orwell (not the only nod, as will be discussed later), Atwood describes that women who are unable to produce healthy babies or who refuse to comply with Gileadean rule are called Unwomen, while babies born with birth defects are called Unbabies. By naming them so, Gilead tries to dehumanise those who refuse to accept or who do not fit in with Gileadean rule; thus, a miscarriage is never the fault of Gilead, but always that of the Unwomen, who are unworthy of a place in Gilead and must be shipped off to the colonies.

At the same time, Offred and others who resist use language as a means of resistance. This is not only because reading and writing are taboo and secretly doing so therefore becomes a subversive act, but also because doing so gives Offred back some of the power Gilead has taken from her. Since Offred has learned to read in pre-Gilead times, she has the ability to do so but lacks any opportunities: she is, as Bergmann puts it, "starved for words that communicate meaning" (849). This is why she treasures the words she finds written inside her closet: "*Nolite te bastardes carborundorum*" (Atwood 62). She is excited by the idea that she is communicating with the woman who previously occupied her room (Commanders receive a new Handmaid every time their current one turns out to be infertile). Unfortunately, this hope turns out to be idle: through the Commander, she finds out that this is actually mock Latin (for "don't let the bastards grind you down"), invented by schoolboys and learned by the other Handmaid in the Commander's study, where he keeps old Latin school books. "Not a message of sisterhood at all, then, it is, at least probably, a male text" (849), Bergmann states. It also confirms for Offred that she is not unique to the Commander, but that he has secret personal interactions with his Handmaids more often. Atwood demonstrates the

power of language by showing how these four words can cause both great joy and sadness in Offred, depending on the meaning she attaches to them.

At other times, Offred's revolt is more successful. With the Commander, she indulges in her first major sin: Scrabble. The simple act of playing a game that requires spelling is an act of defiance in Gilead; as Offred herself remarks, "[c]ontext is all" (Atwood 154). As Andriano notes, it is not a coincidence that the first word she spells is "larynx, a metonym for voice, intimating that voice is primary". She is taking control again, finding her own voice by the simple act of reclaiming language for herself. A more powerful example is the code word Ofglen teaches her to help recognise other women who are resisting Gileadean rule: mayday. The choice is clever: its literal meaning (it comes from French *m'aidez*, help me) is appropriate and it can be sneaked into normal conversation as "May day". Using language subversively like this is one of the few means of resistance left to Offred, but also one of the most powerful: it helps her regain something of her own voice and her own identity.

As I have already noted, Atwood's use of language is reminiscent of Orwell's, even up to using the prefix "un". There are more similarities between *The Handmaid's Tale* and other dystopian texts. While Atwood might not be using the entire SF mega-text, she does draw from the specific dystopian tradition by re-using some elements that will be familiar to readers of Orwell and Huxley. While Atwood herself might have refused the label SF, these connections place her work in the dystopian (and thus the SF) tradition. On the other hand, however, both *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Brave New World* have themselves for a long a time resisted this label (and in the eyes of many still do), so we could also see *The Handmaid's Tale's* refusal to be labelled as another similarity between the works.

Feuer argues that in its very core, *The Handmaid's Tale* presents its readers with the same choice as most other major dystopian works, such as *Brave New World*, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and Zamyatin's *We*: that "between happiness without freedom or freedom without happiness" (83). All of these works have a spokesperson that offers them this choice: Atwood's Aunt Lydia (who trains the Handmaids in the Re-education Centre and teaches them the values of Gilead) has Huxley's Mustapha Mond, Orwell's O'Brien and Zamyatin's Benefactor as her predecessors. All of these novels also feature protagonists that, for some reason or other, fail to fit into society and therefore have to fear either deportation or elimination.

Another interesting similarity between *The Handmaid's Tale* and these novels is "the use of public spectacle as a means of control" (Feuer 84). All societies have regular public events in which everybody is asked to participate: this is done not only to force the people to

show a (fake) sense of patriotism, but also to serve as an outlet for their emotions. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *The Handmaid's Tale*, it is mostly hatred and frustration: Orwell's Two Minute Hate and Hate Week have a similar function as Atwood's Particicution. The Two Minute Hate gives the people of Oceania one moment every day to express all the frustrated feelings they have had to subdue during the rest of the day, aimed against a common enemy: the subversive Brotherhood led by Emmanuel Goldstein or the super state with which Oceania is currently at war, or both. *Nineteen Eighty-Four's* Winston is powerless to resist the Hate:

The horrible thing about the Two Minute Hate was ... that it was impossible to avoid joining in. Within thirty seconds any pretence was unnecessary. A hideous ecstasy of fear and vindictiveness, a desire to kill, to torture, to smash faces in with a sledge-hammer, seemed to flow through the whole group of people. (Orwell 17)

Atwood's Particicution is comparable to this: it is the execution of a criminal convicted for assaulting women, in this case one who has killed a woman and her baby. His punishment is that a group of Handmaids is spurred on to attack him and rip him apart. Just like in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the protagonist cannot resist this mass madness: "A sigh goes up from us; despite myself I feel my hands clench. It is too much, this violation. The baby too, after what we go through. It's true, there is a bloodlust; I want to tear, gouge, rend" (Atwood 290-291). In both books, however, this spectacle is simply a construct: Oceania is constantly at war with one state or another, but chooses to preserve this status quo, and Goldstein probably does not exist, while Offred later learns that the executed Guardian was not a rapist, but a political prisoner. The public rallies are merely ways for the state to control the people's emotions. *Brave New World* has this too, with the exception that its public gatherings do not focus on releasing hate, but on satisfying all the people's needs so frustration will not build up. Huxley has Ford's Day celebrations and Community Singings, not to mention the weekly Solidarity Services which more often than not end in "orgy-porgy" (73). This inventive naming is mirrored by Atwood in her Prayvaganza (a mass wedding ceremony) and Salvagings (large-scale public execution). These names are also reminiscent of Orwell in being euphemisms, like *Nineteen Eighty-Four's* Ministries of Truth and Peace (concerned with deceit/forgery and war, respectively)

There are several more of these thematic similarities (like the fear of loss of identity, the idea of Big Brother or the Eyes always watching) between the books, but there are also some structure- and text-based connections that bind the novels together. For example, Feuer argues that "[t]he Epilogue demonstrates ... Atwood's consciousness of playing off Orwell"

(85): Atwood's epilogue, in which academics discuss the history of (the by now disappeared) Gilead and Orwell's epilogue, which explains the workings of Newspeak in the past tense, both show that the totalitarian states are something of the past. However, while this comes as a relief and a positive note in Orwell, Atwood uses it to show that the return to normality is not good enough, by exposing the male-orientated bias that can easily return if a change is not made for the good.

Another obvious nod to Orwell is the Commander's remark about women:

Women can't add, he said once, jokingly. When I asked him what he meant, he said. For them, one and one and one and one don't make four.

What do they make?, I said, expecting five or three.

Just one and one and one and one, he said. (Atwood 195)

This immediately calls to mind Orwell's "2+2=5", the ultimate downfall of logic in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, where two plus two can equal five if the Party says so: "even the *a priori* truth of mathematics is relative and subject to the violence-enforced will of whoever is in power" (Feuer 88). In *The Handmaid's Tale*, however, Atwood twists this mathematical play into something more like the opposite. The Commander's remark is actually a sort of compliment, since it stresses "the irreducible value of the individual" (Feuer 88). Offred agrees when she is contemplating a romance with Nick: "[w]hat the Commander said is true. One and one and one and one doesn't equal four. Each one remains unique, there is no way of joining them together. They cannot be exchanged, one for the other. They cannot replace each other. Nick for Luke or Luke for Nick" (Atwood 202). Twisting Orwell's idea, Atwood claims that even within a society which focuses on roles rather than on people, and where everything is supposed to be interchangeable, "the truth of human individuality and (only through this individuality) human connectedness is absolute, inviolable" (Feuer 89). Rather than using standard SF tropes like the alien landing and the mad scientist, Atwood uses elements from well-known dystopian novels and twists them in order to give her own opinion on these matters: these intertextual relations show that *The Handmaid's Tale* is embedded in a specific part of the SF mega-text.

Atwood's dystopian Gilead, then, is a very well-crafted fictional society. The SF subgenre of dystopian literature provides Atwood with a chance to explore several worrying tendencies in 1980's society, such as pollution and infertility, the rise of fundamentalist religious movements and the decline of active feminism, to name a few. By working out the most extreme consequences of these problems Atwood aims to warn her readers for these matters. Importantly, when treating these subjects she also pays attention to the psychological

side, such as the natural urge of people to complacency or even collaboration. *The Handmaid's Tale's* literary side is not only represented by this layered social criticism, but also by its exploration of the role of language in the balance of power. At the same time, the novel is firmly embedded in the tradition of SF, not only through its framework but also through its many intertextual connections to and twists on other dystopian novels, mainly *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Whether Atwood agrees with it or not, *The Handmaid's Tale* is an exemplary work of literary SF.

6. McCarthy's Alien Earth: *The Road*

In the case of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006), the question is not so much whether or not the novel can be considered literature, but rather whether or not it can be called SF. The book was a popular as well as a critically acclaimed success, receiving many positive reviews. In the *Literary Review*, Sebastian Shakespeare called it "[m]esmerising", while *The Guardian's* Alan Warner described it as "emotionally shattering". The cover of the 2010 edition features a quote from *The Times*: "a work of such terrible beauty that you will struggle to look away". The most prestigious award McCarthy received for it was the 2007 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, which beats even its inclusion in Oprah's Book Club (a testament to its mainstream success).

Interestingly, in these contexts *The Road* is seldom given the label science fiction. Nowhere on the cover of the book or in the praise collected on its first few pages can any reference to SF be found. Only the occasional reviewer uses the term: Alan Cheuse in *NPR*, for example, is one of the few who states that in *The Road*, McCarthy "ventures in his own way into science fiction". In the established newspapers and magazines, however, *The Road* is never called SF, but rather a "post-apocalyptic tale" (Charles) or a "post-apocalyptic scenario" (Graff), or a story set in a "post-apocalyptic world" (Maslin) or "post-apocalyptic wasteland" (Beck). The trend is clear: SF is out, post-apocalyptic is in. The post-apocalyptic setting, however, is a part of the dystopian tradition, and this tradition, as I have discussed earlier, is one of the main subgenres of SF. Even though publishers and critics might favour the term "post-apocalyptic" over SF, in my analysis of the novel I will show that *The Road* does use part of the framework of SF.

Its setting is indeed post-apocalyptic: a disaster of unspecified nature has made life on Earth almost impossible. The ground has become infertile, the sun is hidden behind grey clouds and rivers have become still pools, devoid of life. Most of McCarthy's efforts go into the description of this dying Earth: events and dialogue are sparse, as is McCarthy's style. Within this wasteland, McCarthy follows a father and a son, who are never named but are just called the man and the boy. They have been travelling the wastes of America for over ten years (or close): the boy was born after the disaster and his only knowledge of the world as it was is what his father has taught him. Most of the novel describes their desperate attempts to stay alive, searching for food and avoiding other survivors, most of whom are violent and have turned to cannibalism. The novel describes their anticlimactic travel to the coast, where a grey and dead sea is all they find. When the father finally succumbs to a disease, the boy finds

refuge with another small band of survivors.

The novel's first element of SF is the central place of the novum. SF's traditional novums, like space ships, aliens and laser guns might be absent, but McCarthy's dying Earth is a novum that certainly has a totalising effect on the story. It allows McCarthy to explore, for example, human behaviour in times of desperate scarcity, but it is much more than a simple backdrop. McCarthy constantly directs the readers' attention away from the action to the image of the bleak and infertile Earth, making its description a goal in itself. Because of this *The Road* has often been discussed in terms of environmental criticism, and this is certainly an important angle from which to approach the book. It is this aspect of the novel that I will focus on, since it provides the best examples of how *The Road* functions as a work of SF.

The novum does differ from the more traditional post-apocalyptic setting in one important way: very little attention is paid to the nature of the disaster. Where Stephen King gladly devotes the first 200 pages of his post-apocalyptic work *The Stand* (1978) to describing the development and worldwide outbreak of a deadly virus before focusing on his protagonists, McCarthy gives his readers only this: "The clocks stopped at 1:17. A long shear of light and then a series of low concussions. What is it? she said. He didnt⁸ answer. He went into the bathroom and threw the lightswitch but the power was already gone" (McCarthy 54). This is the most direct description of the disaster in the novel. Throughout the book, there are only a few more references to the disaster and its immediate aftermath. Rather than the multitude of novums that are usually employed to explain the disaster and the social disintegration and rearrangement that follows, *The Road* has only a few. Terms like "roadagents" (McCarthy 15), "marauders" (McCarthy 15), and the more sinister "bloodcults" (McCarthy 15), all of them already existing terms, are the closest McCarthy comes to being specific about the post-apocalyptic society. Unlike much SF, *The Road* is generally a very low-information book, favouring the description of simple actions like walking, sleeping and scavenging over the careful recreation of a world-changing disaster and all its effects on society. It has even been suggested that the background to this disaster is not a scientific one, but a religious one (Grindley 11). *The Road's* firestorms, the sea full of dead fish and the obscured sun and moon are examples of images also used in the Bible, and the disease the father succumbs to might well be some kind of plague (Grindley 12).

⁸ McCarthy deliberately omits the apostrophes in these negating contractions (dont, wont, etc), just like he omits quotation marks, in keeping with the minimalist style of the novel.

The fact that *The Road's* central novum lacks a thorough scientific background and might even have some supernatural explanation seems to place it outside of the boundaries of the SF genre. However, in working out the consequences of the novum, *The Road* does function as SF. The disaster that created the apocalyptic landscape might not be worked out fully, but within the setting it creates (that of the infertile Earth) everything adheres to the rules of that universe. Furthermore, while the specific details of the disaster are not given, readers can, via the process of cognition, gather a possible reason as to why the disaster happened, as I will demonstrate later. While some of the novel's events (meetings with a man struck by lightning and another called Ely) could be interpreted to have a religious meaning (St. Paul and the prophet Elijah), the story itself features no supernatural events, nor any divine intervention. It is in the eerie similarity between the empirical world and McCarthy's fictional but uncannily realistic wasteland that the strength of the novel lies, as I will explain in more detail later. McCarthy's new world provides him with a unique vantage point from which he can explore various themes, one of the most important being his warning for mankind's exhaustion and possible consequent destruction of the Earth. By showing his readers the harsh reality of a completely exhausted planet, McCarthy tries to make his audience aware of ecological problems. An article in *The Guardian* called "50 People Who Could Change the World" includes Cormac McCarthy, for the reason that *The Road* "could be the most important environmental book ever. It is a thought experiment that imagines a world without a biosphere, and shows that everything we value depends on the ecosystem" (Monbiot qtd. in Vidal). McCarthy's success in doing this is partly because of his use of the SF technique of balancing the estrangement brought about by the novum with cognition.

First of all, the reader is confronted with the otherness of the dying Earth. Most praise of the novel focuses on the skill with which McCarthy describes his post-apocalyptic wasteland, a place devoid of life and hope. One important element is the absence of the sun, traditionally a symbol of happiness and life. Grey clouds cover the Earth: "Nights dark beyond darkness and days more gray each one than what had gone before" (McCarthy 1). Much of the wasteland has been consumed by passing firestorms, leaving both man-made structures and nature destroyed in their wake: "Charred and limbless trunks of trees stretching away on every side. Ash moving over the road and the sagging hands of blind wire strung from the blackened lifepools whining thinly in the wind. A burned house in a clearing and beyond that a reach of meadowlands stark and grey and a raw red mudbank where a roadworks lay abandoned" (McCarthy 6). These descriptions are common in the novel, as the protagonists' journey to the coast leads them across the desolate ruins of America.

It is important to note, as De Bruyn emphasises, that McCarthy "has not simply returned us to an unkempt garden. The novel does not simply evoke the ruin of human stewardship, but the ruin of nature itself. ... [I]t may be difficult to imagine the destruction of the human world, but it is even more difficult to imagine the annihilation of the Earth itself" (De Bruyn 778). This is precisely what McCarthy does, however: not only humankind, but the Earth itself appears to be coming to an end. Already in the first few pages, the father notes that "[t]here'd be no surviving another winter here" (McCarthy 2): conditions are worsening. Years ago, the man saw birds for the last time, circling the Earth "senselessly" (McCarthy 55), and by now, man appears to be the only form of life left. McCarthy describes the dead trees succumbing to the weight of the snow when the man and the boy pass them, until "the wood was nearly gone" (102). The only fruit and vegetables they find are those in tins. The absence of man has not led to a "reclamation project" (De Bruyn 779) by nature; rather, the father muses, they are experiencing "the ponderous counterspectacle of things ceasing to be" (McCarthy 293).

This concept of the dying Earth is thematically important. De Bruyn notes that *The Road* differs from many other post-apocalyptic tales in its lack of any hope for the future, being particularly "pessimistic about Earth's regenerative possibilities ... Apparently, the 'reliable generosity' of the Earth—the nature of the Earth itself, we might say—has evaporated" (779-780). The Earth's ability to regenerate from catastrophe is often a positive element in SF stories. It is, for example, a major plot device in Wells's *The War of the Worlds*, where Martians in war machines might destroy parts of England, but in the end fall prey to simple Earth bacteria to which they are not accustomed. It is also present in the film version of *The Road* (2009), directed by John Hillcoat, which ends with the boy discovering a beetle, implying that nature might return: typical of the Hollywood-style happy ending, but not in accord with the message of the book.

McCarthy offers his readers no such solace: he emphasises the further decline of the Earth, hinting at the end of the world rather than presenting some hopeful perspective. He is critical of the idea that the Earth will simply regenerate from everything that happens to it, warning his readers that this is not something that can simply be taken for granted. That is why the film is so fundamentally different from the novel. At the end of the film, the viewer will have the tendency to relax: whatever disaster befalls the Earth, things will turn out right. In the book, the reader is not allowed this moment of relief but is left with his own uneasy feelings: this is why many critics and reviewers have called the novel a warning. McCarthy only heightens the anxiety of the reader by stressing the singularity of the Earth: in a passage

where the child asks his father whether a spaceship might allow them to reach Mars and find food and water there, his father answers: "No. There's nothing there" (167). Without the Earth, mankind has nowhere to go.

To return to SF terminology, McCarthy changes the world familiar to the reader into an alien world. The sun, always obscured by clouds, has become an "alien sun" (McCarthy 189) rising and falling "in its cold transit" (McCarthy 189). The fact that the man and boy finally reach the sea only to see that it is just as bleak as the rest of the world might be an anticlimax for them, but it is a climax in McCarthy's description of the Earth. The final straw of hope the father and the boy (and with them, the reader) cling to throughout the novel turns out to be one of the most depressing elements of their whole journey. The sea is grey and bleak, devoid of life, and the whole scene resembles "the desolation of some alien sea breaking on the shores of a world unheard of. ... At the tide line a woven mat of weeds and the ribs of fishes in their millions stretching along the shore as far as eye could see like an isocline of death. One vast salt sepulchre. Senseless. Senseless" (McCarthy 233-237).

Interestingly, McCarthy achieves this alienating effect through a variant on the sense of wonder (in this case, it is rather a sense of horror). "Wonder" does not necessarily mean something positive, but can also refer to a sense of awe about something negative, as is the case here: it refers to the awe for the sublime. This also goes for Asimov's classic "Nightfall", with its typical sense-of-wonder ending discussed earlier, to which *The Road* is even textually similar at times: "Thirty-thousand mighty suns shone down in a soul-searching splendor that was more frighteningly cold in its awful indifference than the bitter wind that shivered across the cold, horrible bleak world" (Asimov 20). In McCarthy, the father is struck by a similar feeling: "He walked out in the gray light and stood and he saw for a moment the absolute truth of the world. The cold relentless circling of the intestate Earth. Darkness implacable. The crushing black vacuum of the universe. And somewhere two hunted animals trembling like groundfoxes in their cover" (McCarthy 138); later, he thinks about the "indifferent sun" (McCarthy 234). Where Asimov's Lagashians are struck by the immensity of the universe and, therefore, their own insignificance, McCarthy's protagonists too feel that they are insignificant, as they are swallowed up by the cold, dark and indifferent universe while the Earth slowly but surely becomes as dark and inhospitable as the rest of the known universe.

However, McCarthy never allows his readers to ease their minds by seeing this planet as some alien world: he is constantly reminding his readers that he is referring to the Earth, and America specifically. He employs his own take on Suvin's model of balancing estrangement and cognition: with respect to the setting, McCarthy is balancing estrangement

and *recognition*. While the strangeness of the place he describes is alienating, the reader recognises so much elements that connect the unspecified setting of *The Road* to his own world that he has to conclude that this alien wasteland is in fact the Earth, and America in particular. As Godfrey argues, McCarthy's world constantly balances between being "utterly unreadable and unknowable" (165) and a world that, mainly through the recollections of father, is recognisable as the Earth.

So in describing the Earth, McCarthy focuses mainly on estrangement and recognition. De Bruyn says as much, claiming that the "tension between recognition and estrangement" (782) is striking in several passages. As Godfrey argues, "[i]n this alien world, the father's geographical memories are like those faint lines of text in a palimpsest that show through beneath the newer inscriptions" (164). The boy and the man encounter all kind of familiar man-made structures, from supermarkets and farms to the man's parental house, but they are all treated differently than in the reader's world and they are barely recognisable. As Kunsza argues, McCarthy shows these familiar places in alienating circumstances. Before going near a house beside a river, the man searches for signs of smoke with his binoculars, for while "still-standing buildings and a river could suggest the presence of dangerous people, the lack of smoke and movement indicates otherwise" (Kunsza 63). Everything is judged in terms of the availability of food and shelter and the danger of encountering others. Supermarkets become places to be looted, big cities places to be avoided. The grocery cart becomes an essential tool for survival, since it carries all the travellers' possessions, while the pistol becomes so common that it lies on the table "like another dining implement" (McCarthy 224).

The same tension between estrangement and recognition can be felt in the different ways in which the forty-year-old father, who was thirty at the time of the disaster, and the ten year old boy, who was born right after it, see the world. The father remembers the old world: the boy knows only the bleak new world. It is interesting to note in this context that McCarthy actually uses the classic SF trope of the alien encounter to explain the relationship between the two characters:

When [the father] woke again he thought the rain had stopped. But that wasn't what woke him. He'd been visited in a dream by creatures of a kind he'd never seen before. They did not speak. He thought that they'd been crouching by the side of his kot as he slept and then had skulked away at his awakening. He turned and looked at the boy. Maybe he understood for the first time that to the boy he was himself an alien. A being from a planet that no longer existed.
(McCarthy 163)

The most important memories are those of nature: the bleakness of McCarthy's world is only emphasised by the various flashbacks to the lush and living Earth that confirm that the ashen wasteland really is the Earth. In one of these flashbacks, the father remembers an evening on the beach with his wife, when he stood watching the sea and then "he went back to the fire ... smoothed her hair and said if he were God he would make the world just so and no different" (McCarthy 234). This everyday scene (for the readers, at least) has become immensely powerful and valuable for the father in a world where new experiences like that are impossible. Likewise, the rare pleasures of the boy and the man might also seem strange to the readers: when the man discovers "a cistern filled with water so sweet that he could smell it. ... Nothing in his memory anywhere of anything so good" (McCarthy 130-131). Fresh, sweet water is taken for granted in the well-to-do parts of the world: McCarthy aims to infuse his readers with a new appreciation for it by presenting it in this alien context.

The intriguing final paragraph has the same effect, but is also a hint in the direction of the cause of the disaster. As explained, the disaster itself cannot be analysed cognitively: the reason behind it, however, is something that can be found out by carefully reading the text, and this is where the process of cognition comes in to balance the estrangement. For example, in the final paragraph, in a beautiful description of ordinary brook trout in mountain streams, smelling of "moss in your hands" (McCarthy 307), McCarthy describes the patterns on their backs as "maps of the world in its becoming. ... Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again" (McCarthy 307). This passage hints at the negative influence of human intrusion on nature: the trout, symbolising the wonder of nature, cannot be put back once it has been taken out of its river. Likewise, human exhaustion of the Earth's natural resources poses a genuine threat, inciting a change which could prove irreversible.

Several hints like this can be found throughout the novel: by starting the process of cognition, readers can gather these little scraps of evidence to reconstruct the cause behind the disaster. As De Bruyn points out, a parallel can be drawn between one of the man's flashbacks and the falling down of all the trees: in the flashback, as the man and his uncle gather firewood, they uproot even tree trunks, "the very roots of trees" (780). This is an example of man going too far, exhausting nature as has become the standard today in the consumerist society. The imagery referring to this consumerist society is present throughout the novel, like in the grocery cart the man and the boy use to carry their belonging in. De Bruyn rightly notes that

although the novel does not specify the cause of the disaster, the critique of mechanical consumption is nevertheless present ... If we continue to carelessly

fill our shopping carts and to ignore the environmental problems which force some of us today to wear mouth masks, McCarthy suggests, our children may have to wear masks everywhere and carry their entire world in a grocery cart, like fundamentally homeless vagrants. (De Bruyn 780).

McCarthy is even more explicit in his condemnation of overconsumption with his description of the degeneration of mankind into cannibals:

The world soon to be largely populated by men who would eat your children in front of your eyes and the cities themselves held by cores of blackened looters who tunnelled among the ruins and crawled from the rubble white of tooth and eye carrying charred and anonymous tins of food in nylon nets like shoppers in the commissaries of hell. (197)

Even after the stores of food have given out, some people cannot stop their ever-growing hunger for consumption, resorting even to cannibalism: this is the main difference between the good and the bad in *The Road*. Cannibalism is used "as a metaphor for consumption" (De Bruyn 781), showing how man, in his ever-present need for consumption, eventually even devours himself.

McCarthy employs another element of the SF framework in working out this message: the inclusion and subversion of a popular icon. *The Road* only rarely engages with specific SF icons, but it does use the popular icon of Coca Cola. In the bleak wasteland the father and son find a can of Coca Cola, all the more extraordinary because Coca Cola is one of the two (brand) names in the entire novel. In a sense, this is also a common SF element: people in the future or aliens discovering the last remnants of the Earth as we know it (the fragments of the Statue of Liberty, for example). In a short article on this subject, Donnelly argues that this specific brand name sharpens the contrast between the pre- and post-apocalyptic world. Coca Cola is a throwback to a bygone era, known to the father but unknown to the boy, who asks "What is it?" (McCarthy 22). The answer, Donnelly argues, is "implicit: 'Coke Is It!'" (71). By referring to this famous 1980's slogan, McCarthy invokes the whole of Coca Cola's commercial exploits, which, according to Donnelly, aimed (and aims) to make Coca Cola a universally recognised brand, loved and enjoyed by people all over the world, thus creating "a community of humankind" (72). Indeed, the most recent slogan for Coca Cola is "Share a Coke with Friends", emphasising this idea of a community of happy Coke consumers. Likewise, the boy and his father are, for an instant, happy sharing their coke, forgetting the world around them for a moment.

Many post-apocalyptic novels feature some recognisable element from the past which

serves as a nostalgic throwback to a better time, the time before the war/disaster/alien invasion. The can of Coca Cola might seem to have the same function, but it is actually part of the critique on consumerist society: McCarthy gives a new meaning to the well-known trope. In this context the reality of the world the father and the boy now belong to, represented by the derelict and looted supermarket they are in, proves that Coke's fantasy of a community of happy consumers is hollow and "untenable" (Donnelly 73). As Donnelly convincingly argues:

In its invitation to the reader to envisage the progressive stages of excess and waste through this narrative vignette, the supermarket scene establishes the tension that the text will continue to exploit, between pre- and post-apocalyptic worlds, between the excessive — yet enjoyable — consumption signalled by the can of Coke and the horrific cannibalistic consumption of the novel's present. The novel describes the demise of humanity in the same terms as those articulated in the Coke incident: a detrimentally excessive consumption finds both its apotheosis and its apocalypse in cannibalism, the utter and abject dissolution of recognizable society. (73)

So McCarthy's use of the SF framework does differ somewhat from how it is regularly used: the process of cognition does not provide the readers with a definitive answer to the cause of the disaster. The Biblical imagery only seems to take the novel further away from SF. However, that process of cognition does enable the readers to discover the reason behind the vague disaster, and its environmental criticism then becomes obvious. This theme can be uncovered by looking at the connections between McCarthy's alien world and this world. This is one of the most important elements of science fiction: a new world that departs from the reader's own world, but returns to confront it in some way. *The Road* is not as precise in this as other works, but its universality is also one of its strengths. The boy and the man have no names and only once is a town named (Rock City) and the one brand name is one that is known worldwide: this gives the story universal applicability. Many readers will be able to pick up this book and recognise something of their own world in McCarthy's alien Earth.

This overall vagueness, however, also means that some of the traditional elements of SF are not present in the book. Detailed scientific background on the disaster and the reason for the dying of the Earth or fully worked-out details of the immediate aftermath of the apocalypse and the new structures of society are not present. This also means that *The Road* does not use the SF mega-text of popular tropes and icons very often, though it does manage to subtly invoke the alien encounter trope and certainly manages to subvert the meaning of a

popular icon in a play on another SF trope. The fundamental framework of the novel, however, is that of SF: the novum and its totalising change, providing McCarthy with the opportunity to present his readers with an alien world that is uncannily close to our own and through those connections manages to address specific themes like overconsumption and its effect on the planet. The SF elements that are absent in *The Road* are those that are usually the most obvious signals that a work is SF. The fact that they are not present does not disqualify the novel as a work of SF, though it might make it more difficult to see that it is. It is not so that *The Road* is not SF: it is only that McCarthy does not need to leave this Earth in order to present his readers with an alien planet.

7. Conclusion: Giving SF a Second Chance

With this thesis, my aim was to take away some of the prejudices that exist towards SF by showing that this genre can produce works with literary qualities. By exploring the origins of SF and its early history, I have tried to show that the genre has always known a tension between low and high quality SF. In Europe especially, scientific romance was turning into a serious speculative genre, only to be absorbed by the flood of American SF that has now become dominant throughout the world. This development had both negative and positive consequences: on the one hand, it has created a largely negative view of SF as a shallow genre of talking squids and intergalactic space battles. At the same time, this ghetto of pulp not only established SF as a genre and gave it its first taste of mainstream popularity, but also allowed a more serious branch of SF to develop within the protected environment of this ghetto.

While works within the genre are varied, most of SF functions through a similar framework. Like other genres, SF has some stock elements that it constantly reuses. One of the main characteristics of SF is the *novum*, the radical change between the fictional world and that of the reader, which allows for the play between estrangement and recognition that defines most SF. In doing this it mostly reuses traditional tropes and icons, all of which have been formed into a mega-text of SF, knowledge of which is vital in appreciating the genre; this relative inaccessibility is one of the reasons that quality SF has always struggled to make a name for itself. The genre allows for explorations of all kinds of interesting topics, from the workings of a post-apocalyptic society to the implications of genderlessness, but (at its best) also remains closely connected to our own world, so that the fictional universe can act as a mirror to our own.

In my case studies I have demonstrated how the framework of SF can produce works that are definitely SF, but at the same time can be said to have literary qualities. LeGuin's genderless society, McCarthy's dying Earth and Atwood's totalitarian theocracy are all *novums* that radically change the fictional universes from our own, yet at the same time all of these novels have some important relation to contemporary society. They employ the structures of SF, but refrain from traditional SF pitfalls such as flat characterisation, repetitive plots and general irrelevance. They have psychologically challenging characters, new takes on traditional SF tropes and are filled with social, ecological and gender criticism.

The fact remains, however, that even though these cases where SF blends with literature are no exceptions, their recognition as such is. A bias against SF remains, which makes it hard for SF to take the final step into the field of literature. In this journey through

time, space and a multitude of fictional universes, I have tried to show that some SF, even the kind that includes aliens and space ships, has much to offer, as long as one approaches it with an open mind. Just don't panic.

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