

H.G. Wells' Scientific Romances: A Unique Blend of Science and Fantasy



Literature

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Abstract

Story telling was the most popular medium of literature since ages ,but it all started in verse form and gradually the birth of novel took place which was recognized as a well constructed prose narrative. Its origins can be traced back to Richardson's Pamela in eighteenth century and Sidney's Arcadia in the sixteenth century .Novel was the last literary form to be established but its growing popularity knew no bounds .Stories have been told in form of epics ,ballads, anecdotes or romances , out of these romance assumed varied forms. 'Romance 'basically meant 'courtly romance in verse 'or a 'popular book', thus they were works of fiction and generally non-historical but in the thirteenth century romance was almost any type of adventurous story dealing with chivalry or even love with the establishment of novel as a popular literary genre romances came to be written in prose. In this paper I have tried to study the contributions of H.G.Wells in the field of fiction in form of scientific romances which helped in establishing science fiction as a distinct literary genre.

A romance is primarily a form of entertainment with elements of improbability, extravagance and naivety along with love and adventure, something marvelous something extravagant. It may also be didactic in its aim but that is purely incidental. Generally the term 'romance' has been used rather loosely to describe heroic and spectacular chivalric deeds, narratives of gallant love and marvelous adventures. But in eighteenth and nineteenth centuries element of fantasy and a sense of mystic became prominent and romance became a work of fiction with scenes and incidents a little removed from real life and "surrounded by a halo of mystery, an atmosphere of strangeness and adventure."

Although the prose romance had its ancestors in the chivalric romance of the Middle Ages and the Gothic novel of the late eighteenth century, Northrope Frye's formal definition of romance intends at suggesting influence of folk-tales and fairy tales in the subsequent history of narrative; "If superior in degree to other men and to the environment, the typical hero of romance, whose actions are marvelous, but who is himself identified as a human being. The hero of romance moves in a world in which ordinary laws of nature are slightly suspended: prodigies of courage and endurance, unnatural to us, are natural to him ,and enchanted weapons, talking animals, terrifying ogres and witches, and tailsmen's of miraculous power violate no rule of probability once the postulates of romance have been established."(1)

The reader should experience a sense of exhilaration and discovery at the same time. So 'scientific romance' helps in promoting exploratory thinking and widening the horizons of imagination beyond established social conventions.

These 'scientific romances' gradually paved the way for the development of scientific fiction. A science fiction is generally a short novel or novella about a large variety of topics ranging from visits to other planets, discoveries, interplanetary warfare to utopian and even dystopian visions. They are also related to the technological, social, climatic, geological and ecological changes and sometimes even the supernatural forces. Although they are full of fantasy, stretching the reader's imagination to the ultimate, still they are based on reality. The term 'science fiction' was first used by William Wilson in A Little Earnest Book Upon A Great Old Subject (1851). He supports Thomas Campbell's statement explaining similarities between fiction and poetry by emphasizing that science fiction may deal with scientific truths but are presented in form of a pleasant story which may be poetical and at the same time, true.

In fact we can trace back the history of science fiction to *Vera Historia* (A.D.150) by Luccian of Samosata where the hero visits the moon and the sun and is involved in interplanetary warfare. In the Middle Ages 'vision literature' became very popular which dealt with the exploration of metaphysical worlds; heaven, hell and purgatory. Gradually the interest in utopianism developed with the publication of *Utopia* (1516) by expeditions into space besides other adventures. Later Francis Godwin's *The Man in the Moone* (1638), Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Birthmark* (1843) and Rappaccini's *Daughter* (1844) Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) and even a number of stories published by Edgar Allen Poe showed that there was a growing trend towards science fiction mode of writing which is further proved by the growing popularity of Jules Verne(1828-1905) with books like *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*(1870) ,in fact he can be considered responsible for making science fiction plausible. Besides Jules Verne three lesser known writers who tried this new domain of scientific romances in nineteenth century were M.P.Sheil's *The Yellow Danger* (1898), a kind of futuristic invasion story, William Hope Hodgson wrote a visionary allegory called *The House on the Borderland* (1980) and J.D.Beresford's *The Hampdenshire Wonder* (1912) was also quite popular. Even authors like Rudyard Kipling and Arthur Conan Doyle seemed aware of other possibilities in fiction apart from traditional realism.

Then in 1890s H.G.Wells made a great impact by his scientific romances like *The Time Machine* (1895), *The Wonderful Visit*(1895), *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (1896), *The Invisible Man: A Grotesque Romance* (1897), *The War of the Worlds* (1898), *Tales of Space and Time* (1899),*When the Sleeper Awakes* (1899), *The First Men in the Moon* (1901), *The Food of the Gods and How it Came to Earth*(1904), *In the Days of the Comet* (1906),*The Country of the Blind and Other Stories* (1911),*The World Set Free: A Story of Mankind* (1914)and *Men Like Gods* (1922). He is considered by some as one of the great originators of science fictional ideas, and his literary fame was due to the fact that he had a scientific bend of mind. In fact H.G. Wells has been described by Warren Wagar as "the most serious of the popular writers of his time, and the most popular of the serious." His popularity can be judged by George Orwell's estimate of his influence on the thinking people of his times; "Thinking people who were born about the beginning of this century are in some sense Wells' own creation. How much influence any mere writer has, and especially a "popular" writer whose work takes effect quickly, is questionable, but I doubt whether anyone, who was writing books between 1900 and1920, at any rate in the English language influenced the young so much. The minds of all of us, and therefore the physical world, would be perceptibly different if Wells had never existed" (2)

Wells was considered by some as a 'scientist' as well as 'thinker' because he began writing scientific romances in the tradition of Jules Verne, Hawthorne, Stevenson, Rider Haggard and others. These particular brands of romances later came to be superseded by 'science fiction'. They were an imaginative awakening to the transformation of our thinking resulting from scientific discoveries and the control over the external world which is the most dominating feature of our present day modern society. They also helped in the development of the speculative, generalizing and synthesizing tendencies of the mind. Besides developing fear and generating excitement among the readers, they also developed a sense of the universe rather than a sense of the self.

The narrative framework of these romances was developed not only by Wells' own observations and experiences, but by reconstructing the complete physical, organic and human frame. A romance is like a dream, but scientific romance combines fear and hope with the dream. Wells make use of fantasy but in a restrained manner, within the domain of scientific plausibility. In fact in this fusion of romance and scientific realism lies the excitement of Wells' 'scientific romances'. According to Professor Patrick Parrinder of Reading University who has made significant contribution to the studies of science fiction ,“The significance of Wells' contribution to the definition of Science Fiction lies in this combination of fantasy and realism”(3)

On one hand, science fiction can be taken as a celebration of the technological development, the power of the machine, which has led to the industrial progress; on the other, it deals with the anxieties of the mankind that will ultimately result from the misuse of the power of technology. Wells advocates scientific progress but only to a certain extent, as it is evident from the fact that in all his scientific romances there runs a pessimistic strain. He was afraid that this directionless progress which takes form of capitalism, western imperialism or industrialization will ultimately lead to the destruction of mankind. In fact the presentation of non-human characters, the world of robots, androids and featureless human beings is an expression of the twentieth century phenomenon of alienation.

In this scientific age when the contemporary civilization is losing all its values leading to the degradation of the human race, Wells wanted to set up a new world order; this desire was the foundation of his utopian thoughts—establishing a well planned and highly ordered society was the main objective of all his writings. His scientific bent of mind advocated a non-static Utopia based on Darwin's theory of biological evolution which emphasized continual struggle for survival which makes his Utopia different from Plato's; ".....The Utopia of a modern dreamer must needs differ in one fundamental aspect from the Nowhere and Utopias men planned before Darwin quickened the thought of the world.... (those were all) perfect and static states, a balance of happiness won for ever against the forces of unrest and disorder that inhere in things Changes and development were dammed back by invincible dams forever. The modern Utopia must be a kinetic one, seen not as a permanent state, but as a hopeful stage, leading to a long ascent of stages."(4)

By 1920s the utopian vision lost its appeal and dystopian visions became popular, George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty Four* (1949) is the most famous work of anti-utopian brand. In America science fiction became immensely popular in the 1920s especially through pulp literature published in magazines, and special mention must be made of Edgar Rice Burroughs' space fiction stories and Hugo Gernsbeck's contributions to *Amazing Stories*. Between 1930s and 1940s American science fiction developed into a full fledged literary genre, becoming more intellectual and sophisticated especially due to John W. Campbell, editor of the magazine *Astounding*. He engaged such writers as Isaac Asimov who wrote such robotic and detective scientific stories like *I, Robot* (1951) *The Caves of Steel* (1954) and *The Naked Sun* (1956).

With the arrival of paper backs science fiction gained further popularity in America and gradually writers started writing novels in this field along with short stories. Science fiction developed more rapidly in America than in Europe, this is evident from the fact that since the 1950s American writers have dominated the scene with their bulk production. Today science fiction has attained the status of a distinct literary genre and has become part of the college and university syllabuses. The first college known to have included it in its syllabus in 1953 was the City College of New York and in 1962 Mark Hillegas course at Colgate included many of Wells' works besides *Brave New World*, *Nineteen Eighty Four* and *Lord of the Flies*. By 1976 we can see that there were around 2000 college –level science fiction courses taught in various colleges and universities in the United States of America. Compared to this, there are around only 50 British colleges and universities where science fiction courses are recommended despite of the major role played in the development of this literary genre. The reasons could be more social than literary as some people viewed these works with contempt as Alvin Toffler in *The Future Shock* has expressed his views on the "futurist studies"; "Science fiction is held in low regard as a branch of literature, and perhaps it deserves this critical contempt. But if we view as a kind of sociology of the future, rather than literature, science fiction has immense value as a mind stretching force for the creation of the habit of anticipation."(5)

In spite of all the debates on the literary value of science fiction one cannot deny the fact that the science fiction is easily available to the youngsters as a 'future oriented' literature and it features very widely in variety of courses like history, philosophy, politics and sociology etc., mostly in conjunction with other material.

Science fiction is actually an interdisciplinary subject as Mathew Arnold has emphasized this fact; “.....all learning is scientific which is systematically laid out and followed up to its original sources....a genuine humanism is scientific.”(6)

As it has already been stated that science fiction made more progress in the American society than in the European society the major reason could be that it was accepted as mode of literature by a particular section of society as Patrick Parrinder has asserted in his book the Science Fiction: Its Criticism and Teaching;“Science fiction was ‘relevant’ and ‘non-elitist’ literature , tending to confirm rather than to affront the students sense of belonging to a new generation with a unique identity. For the more far-sighted, too, it was a radical mode of writing, capable of challenging and transcending existing social norms.”(7)

Although science fiction is an imaginative work of art but still it cannot be treated as an “art for art’s sake” because it is a kind of a literary response to the needs and dreams of the present generation ,as its futuristic in approach rather than a sentimental response to the idealism of the past. So it can be regarded as a ‘thinking machine’ and through the imaginative device of the ‘working model’ it examines; “....our responses to alien worlds and situations which, though they are make- believe, anticipate the kinds of alienness to which we may have to respond in our own lives. Thus the decision to study science fiction directs our attention neither to a fixed past(the classical tradition), nor to a fixed present embodied in ‘laws’ of nature, but to an open-ended and changing future.”(8)So it is significant to note that scientific romances have come a long way since its conception to be regarded as a separate literary form involving a variety of literary experiments and innovations, thus widening its area and scope involving the scientific possibilities and futuristic. (8)

References

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