



From Speculation to Canon: The Growth and Development of Science Fiction as a Literary Genre

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ABSTRACT

Science fiction has emerged as one of the most influential literary genres of the modern era, reflecting humanity's complex relationship with science, technology, and future possibilities. Rooted in speculative imagination and scientific inquiry, the genre explores themes such as time travel, space exploration, artificial intelligence, alien encounters, genetic engineering, and dystopian societies. This article examines the growth and development of science fiction as a literary genre in a technologically driven era, tracing its historical origins and thematic evolution. The study highlights the pioneering contributions of Mary Shelley, Jules Verne, and H.G. Wells, who laid the intellectual and aesthetic foundations of modern science fiction. Frankenstein, The Time Machine, The Invisible Man, The War of the Worlds, and The Island of Dr. Through critical analysis of canonical texts such as *Morrow*, this paper examines how early science fiction engaged with the scientific anxieties and socio-political realities of their time. In addition, the article explores key science fiction themes, theoretical perspectives such as alienation and denigration, and national variations including British, American, and Indian science fiction. The study also examines the transformation of the genre in the digital age, incorporating concepts such as posthumanism, techno-criticism, and



digital literature. Ultimately, the article argues that early science fiction narratives continue to have a profound impact on contemporary literature, film, and digital storytelling, reaffirming the genre's relevance in understanding present realities and future trajectories.

Introduction

Science fiction occupies a distinctive and influential place in the literary canon, acting as a genre that bridges imagination and scientific reason. Unlike traditional realism, which focuses on representing the familiar world, science fiction deliberately constructs alternative realities shaped by scientific progress, technological inventions, and speculative futures. Through these fictional worlds, the genre questions human identity, social structures, moral responsibility, and the consequences of scientific progress. In a world increasingly defined by digital technologies, artificial intelligence, and rapid scientific change, science fiction has become more relevant than ever before.

Although often associated with visions of the future, science fiction is deeply rooted in historical contexts. The genre emerged as a response to scientific discoveries, industrialization, and changing socio-political conditions. The nineteenth century, marked by the Industrial Revolution and advances in medicine, physics, and engineering, provided fertile ground for speculative thought. Writers began to imagine not only the possibilities of scientific progress, but also its dangers and moral implications. Thus, science fiction developed into a genre that simultaneously celebrated and criticized science.

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818) is widely considered the foundational work of science fiction. Shelley introduced a new form of storytelling that combined Gothic narrative techniques with scientific experimentation, emphasizing moral responsibility and human aspiration. Later writers such as Jules Verne developed the genre with an emphasis on scientific exploration and technological optimism, while H.G. Wells transformed science fiction into a powerful medium for social criticism and philosophical inquiry. Wells' imaginative narratives addressed themes such as class conflict, imperialism, evolution, and technological dominance, earning him the title "Father of Science Fiction".

This article attempts to examine the growth and development of science fiction as a literary genre from its early origins to its contemporary digital forms. By analysing key texts and tracing thematic and theoretical developments, the study demonstrates how science fiction has evolved in response to changing scientific realities and cultural concerns. This paper explores how early science fiction



narratives shape modern literature, film, and digital storytelling, and reinforce the enduring significance of the genre.

Aim and Scope of the Study

The primary aim of this study is to analyse the historical evolution and literary significance of science fiction as a genre in the context of technological advancement. The article attempts to examine how early science fiction narratives have laid the foundation for contemporary speculative fiction and digital storytelling. Mary Shelley, Jules Verne, H. G. Wells, and H. G. Wells are the focus. Focusing on the works of H. G. Wells, the study highlights the fundamental role these writers played in shaping the themes, narrative strategies, and philosophical concerns of the genre. Beyond textual analysis, the scope of the study expands to include theoretical perspectives such as alienation, denigration, posthumanism, and techno-criticism. The article also explores the national variations of science fiction, paying particular attention to the British, American, and Indian traditions. In addition, the study examines the socio-political relevance of science fiction in the contemporary world, analysing how the genre addresses issues such as technological control, moral responsibility, environmental crisis, and human survival.

By situating science fiction within a broader cultural and technological framework, this article aims to demonstrate the relevance of the genre as a literary form and as a method of critical inquiry. The study ultimately argues that science fiction serves as an important tool for understanding the present and imagining alternative futures.

Defining Science Fiction in a Modern Perspective

Science fiction can be defined as a literary genre that explores scientific ideas, technological inventions, and speculative futures through imaginative narratives grounded in logical inquiry. Unlike fantasy, which relies on supernatural elements, science fiction is rooted in scientific credibility, even when it strays into speculative or fictional realms. The genre examines the impact of science and technology on individuals, societies, and civilizations, often raising moral and philosophical questions about progress and power.

From a modern perspective, science fiction serves as an umbrella term that encompasses a wide variety of narratives that engage with the scientific imagination. These narratives include stories of space travel, time travel, artificial intelligence, cybernetic enhancement, alien encounters, and dystopian futures. Contemporary science fiction reflects the anxieties and aspirations of a technologically driven



world are addressed, with topics such as digital surveillance, climate change, biotechnology, and artificial intelligence.

The popularity of science fiction in the modern era is due to rapid technological advancements and increasing public engagement with science. Developments in information technology, robotics, and space exploration have transformed everyday life, making speculative narratives more relatable and immediate. Readers and audiences turn to science fiction not only for entertainment, but also for insight into the moral and social implications of technological change.

Modern science fiction exists in multiple media, including novels, short stories, films, television series, graphic novels, and digital platforms. The rise of digital literature has further expanded the possibilities of the genre, enabling interactive storytelling, hypertext narratives, and multimedia experiments. These digital forms challenge traditional notions of authorship and readership, reflecting the evolving nature of literary production in the digital age.

Science fiction also encompasses a variety of subgenres, each addressing specific thematic concerns. Cyberpunk narratives depict dystopian futures characterized by advanced technology and social decay, emphasizing the tension between corporate power and individual agency. Space opera narratives focus on interstellar travel and cosmic conflict, often exploring questions of empire and identity. Dystopian fiction presents dark visions of authoritarian control and technological dominance, while apocalyptic narratives explore global catastrophe and human survival. Additionally, the distinction between soft and hard science fiction reflects the interdisciplinary nature of the genre: soft science fiction emphasizes social sciences and human relationships, while hard science fiction prioritizes scientific accuracy and technical detail. Together, these forms demonstrate the adaptability and richness of science fiction as a genre. In the modern context, science fiction serves not only as a method of imaginative storytelling but also as a critical framework for understanding the complexities of a technologically mediated world.

The Evolution of Science Fiction as a Literary Genre

The evolution of science fiction as a literary genre is closely linked to the historical development of science, technology, and modern thought. Although speculative narratives existed in ancient and medieval literature, science fiction emerged as a distinct genre in the nineteenth century, a period characterized by industrialization, scientific discovery, and social transformation. The rapid advancement



of scientific knowledge during this period forced writers to imagine the future implications of technology and experimentation, thereby giving rise to a new literary style based on speculation and rational inquiry.

The Industrial Revolution played a crucial role in shaping early science fiction. Innovations in machinery, transportation, medicine, and communication fundamentally changed human life, inspiring both optimism and anxiety. Writers began to question the moral boundaries of scientific progress and its potential consequences for humanity. Thus, science fiction developed into a genre that not only imagined technological possibilities but also critically examined their social and moral implications. Unlike earlier fantasy narratives, science fiction was distinguished by its emphasis on scientific plausibility. Even when depicting extraordinary phenomena such as time travel or artificial life, early science fiction sought to ground its narratives in contemporary scientific theories. This commitment to rational explanation set the genre apart. Its intellectual credibility was due to its intellectual rigor. By the late 19th century, science fiction had established itself as a literary form capable of engaging with complex philosophical and socio-political issues.

Mary Shelley and the Birth of the Scientific Imagination

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818) is widely accepted as a foundational text of science fiction. Written at a time when scientific experimentation was rapidly advancing, the novel reflects contemporary debates surrounding electricity, galvanism, and the nature of life. Shelley's narrative centres on Victor Frankenstein, a scientist driven by the desire to overcome natural limits by creating life from inanimate matter. Through the story, Shelley explores the moral responsibilities of scientific innovation and the dangers of unbridled ambition.

Frankenstein is significant not only for its scientific premise but also for its philosophical depth. It raises questions about creator and creation, responsibility and abandonment, and the moral consequences of scientific experimentation. Victor Frankenstein's failure lies not in his scientific achievement but in his refusal to accept responsibility for his creation. This distinguishes Frankenstein from earlier speculative narratives and positions it as a critical examination of the impact of science on humanity. Shelley's novel also anticipates modern debates in bioethics, genetic engineering, and artificial intelligence. Often mistaken for a monster, the creature is portrayed as an intelligent and sensitive being who suffers as a result of social rejection. This portrayal challenges simplistic notions of horror and underscores the importance of empathy. Moral responsibility. In this sense, Frankenstein serves as both a cautionary tale and a philosophical inquiry into the limits of human knowledge.



In addition, Shelley's works reflect the anxieties of a society undergoing rapid scientific and industrial change. By combining Gothic elements with scientific speculation, she created a narrative that has resonated for centuries. Frankenstein laid the foundation for subsequent science fiction by showing how scientific ideas could be integrated into literary narratives to explore deep moral and existential questions.

Jules Verne and Scientific Optimism

While Mary Shelley emphasized the moral dangers of scientific ambition, Jules Verne approached science fiction with curiosity and optimism. Reflecting the spirit of 19th-century scientific progress, Verne's works celebrate scientific exploration and technological ingenuity. His novels often focus on adventure and discovery, portraying science as a means to expand human knowledge and overcome natural limitations.

Verne's "*Journey to the Centre of the Earth and Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*" exemplify his commitment to scientific accuracy and imaginative storytelling. In *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, Captain Nemo's submarine, the Nautilus, represents technological prowess and human ingenuity. Verne's detailed descriptions of scientific instruments and natural phenomena lend credibility to his speculative narratives, reinforcing the genre's credibility.

Despite his optimism, Verne's works are not devoid of social and political commentary. For example, Captain Nemo embodies both scientific mastery and moral ambiguity, reflecting the complex relationship between science and power. Verne's narratives It is often suggested that scientific progress should be guided by ethical principles to avoid disastrous consequences. Verne's contribution to science fiction lies in his ability to evoke wonder and curiosity while maintaining scientific rigor. His works expanded the scope of the genre by demonstrating that scientific imagination can coexist with narrative excitement and intellectual inquiry. As a result, Verne played a crucial role in popularizing science fiction and establishing it as a respected literary genre.

H.G. Wells and the Maturity of Science Fiction

H.G. Wells is widely considered the architect of modern science fiction due to his ability to combine scientific speculation with social criticism. In contrast to Verne's optimistic outlook, Wells's narratives often present a darker, more critical perspective on scientific progress. His works explore the social, political, and moral consequences of technological progress, establishing science fiction as a vehicle for social commentary.



The Time Machine (1895) is one of Wells's most influential works, introducing the concept of time travel as a literary device. Through the Time Traveler's journey into the distant future, Wells criticizes class divisions and industrial capitalism. Eloi and Morlock symbolize the consequences of extreme social inequality, reflecting Wells's interest in social justice and human evolution. In *The Invisible Man*, Wells examines the psychological and moral consequences of scientific discovery. The hero's ability to become invisible leads not to liberation, but to isolation and moral corruption. The novel suggests that scientific power, when separated from moral responsibility, can lead to destructive behaviour. In this sense, *The Invisible Man* functions as a critique of individualism and unbridled ambition. *The War of the Worlds* provides a powerful commentary on imperialism and human frailty. By depicting an alien invasion of Earth, Wells subverts the colonial narrative and forces readers to confront the brutality of imperial domination. The novel highlights the fragility of human civilization and challenges assumptions of technological superiority.

Similarly, *The Island of Dr. Moreau* explores the boundaries between humanity and animality through the lens of scientific experiments. The novel raises disturbing questions about evolution, morality, and the abuse of scientific authority. Dr. Moreau's experiments reflect the dangers of dehumanization and moral transgression in the pursuit of knowledge.

Through these works, Wells transformed science fiction into a serious literary genre capable of addressing complex social and philosophical issues. His narratives demonstrate that science fiction is not simply about gadgets or speculative ideas for the future, but about the human condition.

Common Themes and Theoretical Perspectives in Science Fiction

Science fiction as a literary genre is unified by a set of recurring themes that reflect humanity's evolving relationship with science, technology, and society. These themes serve not only as narrative devices, but also as critical tools that encourage readers to examine their own historical and cultural realities. One of the defining characteristics of science fiction is its ability to transform contemporary concerns into speculative narratives that project possible futures or alternative worlds.

One of the most important themes in science fiction is the impact of technology on human identity. Many science fiction narratives explore how technological advances change human consciousness, behaviour, and social structures. Artificial intelligence, cybernetic enhancement, and genetic modification are challenging traditional notions of what it should be. Human. These narratives raise ethical questions about autonomy, agency, and responsibility in a technologically mediated world.



Another recurring theme is power and control. Science fiction often depicts societies ruled by authoritarian regimes, advanced surveillance systems, or corporate dominance. Dystopian narratives, in particular, highlight the dangers of technological control and the erosion of individual freedom. By exaggerating these trends, science fiction exposes the political implications of technological innovation and warns against its misuse.

Alienation and isolation play a prominent role in science fiction. Those with extraordinary scientific abilities or who exist in technologically advanced environments often experience social and psychological alienation. This theme reflects modern anxieties about disconnection in an increasingly digital world. Science fiction thus acts as a mirror to contemporary experiences of isolation and fragmentation.

Estrangement and Defamiliarization

Alienation, a term coined by Darko Suvin, is one of the most influential theoretical concepts in science fiction studies. Alienation refers to the creation of an unfamiliar world that distances readers from their everyday reality and makes critical reflection possible. By presenting alternative societies or future scenarios, science fiction encourages readers to question existing social norms, values, and power structures.

Closely related to blindness is the concept of depersonalization, first proposed by Russian formalist critics. Depersonalization is achieved by presenting familiar objects or experiences in an unfamiliar way, thereby renewing understanding. Science fiction achieves depersonalization by reimagining ordinary aspects of life through technological or speculative means. Lenses. For example, time travel narratives force readers to rethink historical progress, while artificial intelligence narratives challenge assumptions about consciousness and agency. Through alienation and deconstruction, science fiction transforms the act of reading into a critical exercise. Readers are not only entertained, but also forced to analyze their own world from a new perspective. This critical function distinguishes science fiction from purely escapist literature and underscores its intellectual significance.

Posthumanism in science fiction

Posthumanism has emerged as a central theoretical framework in contemporary science fiction. Post humanist narratives challenge anthropocentric views of the world by questioning the boundaries between humans, machines, and other living beings. Advances in artificial intelligence, biotechnology,



and cybernetics have made posthuman scenarios more plausible, further increasing the relevance of the genre.

In science fiction, posthuman characters often embody hybrid identities that combine human and technological elements. Cyborgs, androids, and genetically engineered creatures exemplify the posthuman condition. These figures raise philosophical questions about consciousness, form, and morality. By depicting posthuman futures, science fiction questions the stability of human identity and explores alternative modes of existence. Posthumanism also reflects contemporary anxieties about technological dependency and loss of autonomy. While some narratives portray posthuman transformation as a form of empowerment, others portray it as a threat to human agency and moral responsibility. This ambiguity underscores science fiction's crucial interaction with technological progress. Techno-criticism and Ethical Inquiry

Technological criticism examines the ideological and ethical dimensions of technology in literary texts. Science fiction often adopts a techno-critical stance, highlighting the unintended consequences of scientific innovation. Rather than celebrating technology unconditionally, the genre often exposes its potential to increase inequality, environmental degradation, and social fragmentation.

Through speculative narratives, science fiction questions the assumption that technological progress equals social progress. Works such as Wells's *The Invisible Man* and Shelley's *Frankenstein* demonstrate how scientific achievement can lead to destruction and suffering when divorced from moral responsibility. These narratives emphasize the need for moral responsibility in scientific practice.

Techno-criticism in science fiction also extends to contemporary issues such as digital surveillance, data mining, and artificial intelligence. By imagining extreme technological scenarios, this genre encourages readers to think about the ethical implications of current technological trends.

National Variants of Science Fiction

Science fiction has developed differently in national and cultural contexts, reflecting different historical experiences and social concerns. While the genre shares common themes globally, national traditions have contributed unique perspectives and narrative styles.

British Science Fiction

British science fiction is characterized by its emphasis on social criticism and philosophical inquiry. Writers such as Mary Shelley and H. G. Wells used hypothetical narratives to examine issues of



class, power, and moral responsibility. British Science Fiction The fiction often reflects scepticism about unbridled scientific progress, highlighting its social and moral consequences. This tradition continues in contemporary British science fiction, which often deals with themes of environmental crisis and political instability.

American science fiction

American science fiction developed in tandem with the country's rapid industrialization and technological innovation. In the 20th century, American writers often embraced themes of space exploration, technological optimism, and individualism. The genre flourished during the Golden Age of science fiction, with narratives that emphasized scientific achievements and future possibilities. However, later American science fiction took a more critical perspective, addressing issues such as nuclear war, corporate power, and environmental destruction.

Indian Science Fiction

Indian science fiction represents a unique and evolving tradition that integrates scientific imagination with cultural and philosophical concerns. Early contributions can be found in figures like Jagadish Chandra Bose, whose speculative writings combined science with indigenous thought. Contemporary Indian science fiction explores topics such as artificial intelligence, digital surveillance, climate change, and postcolonial identity. By situating scientific speculation in local contexts, Indian science fiction offers alternative visions of technological futures that challenge Western-centric narratives.

Diverse Science Fiction Narratives

Science fiction encompasses a variety of narrative forms, each addressing specific thematic concerns. Cyberpunk narratives depict dystopian futures dominated by advanced technology and corporate control. Space operas focus on interstellar travel and cosmic conflict, often exploring issues of empire and identity. Featuring dystopian fiction. Totalitarian societies shaped by technological dominance, apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic narratives examine global catastrophe and human survival. Furthermore, the distinction between soft and hard science fiction highlights the intrinsic nature of the genre. Soft science fiction emphasizes social sciences and human relationships, while hard science fiction prioritizes scientific accuracy and technical detail. Together, these varieties demonstrate the genre's adaptability and thematic richness.



Science Fiction in the Digital Age: Digital Literature and Cyberpunk Narratives

The advent of digital technology has significantly transformed the production, dissemination, and reception of science fiction. Digital platforms have expanded the genre beyond print, enabling new forms of storytelling such as hypertext fiction, interactive narratives, graphic simulations, and multimedia texts. Digital literature has redefined traditional notions of authorship, readership, and narrative structure, allowing readers to actively participate in the construction of meaning.

As a genre inherently interested in technological futures, science fiction has found a natural affinity with digital literature. Hypertext narratives challenge linear storytelling by offering multiple narrative paths that reflect the fragmented and networked nature of contemporary digital culture. Interactive science fiction narratives simulate futuristic environments, immersing readers in hypothetical worlds shaped by technology. These developments demonstrate how science fiction continues to evolve in response to technological change.

Cyberpunk literature is one of the most influential subgenres to emerge in the digital age. Cyberpunk narratives are typically set in dystopian futures characterized by advanced technology, cybernetic enhancement, artificial intelligence, and corporate dominance. Technological sophistication and social breakdown, often summed up by the phrase 'high tech, low life'. Cyberpunk literature criticizes digital capitalism, surveillance culture, and the erosion of personal identity in technologically saturated societies.

Cyberpunk narratives reflect contemporary concerns about data control, virtual reality, and the commodification of human experience. By depicting futures in which technology increases inequality and alienation, cyberpunk serves as a cautionary lens through which to examine today's digital practices. The rise of cyberpunk underscores science fiction's ability to adapt to new technological realities while maintaining its critical function.

Science fiction, contemporary cinema, and popular culture

Science fiction's influence extends beyond literature and shapes contemporary cinema, television, and popular culture. Many modern films and web series draw heavily from early science fiction narratives, adapting their themes and ideas for visual media. Ideas such as time travel, alien invasion, artificial intelligence, and dystopian futures, first introduced in the works of Shelley, Verne, and Wells, dominate contemporary storytelling. Science fiction films have played a crucial role in popularizing the genre, making speculative ideas accessible to a global audience. Visual representations of future



technologies and alternate realities add to the genre's deep appeal. At the same time, these cinematic adaptations often retain the moral and philosophical concerns of their literary predecessors, addressing issues such as technological dominance, environmental degradation, and human survival. Digital media platforms have further expanded the scope of science fiction by enabling transmedia storytelling. Science fiction narratives now exist across novels, films, video games, and online forums, creating interconnected fictional universes. This fusion of media reflects the genre's adaptation and relevance in a digitally interconnected world.

The socio-political relevance of science fiction in the contemporary world

Science fiction plays a key role in contemporary socio-political discourses by offering speculative frameworks for understanding current challenges. Dystopian and apocalyptic narratives, in particular, reflect collective anxieties about climate change, pandemics, political instability, and technological surveillance. By imagining extreme scenarios, science fiction encourages critical reflection on current social and political trajectories.

By exposing the consequences of technological control and authoritarian rule, the genre often questions power structures and ideological systems. Science fiction narratives challenge readers to consider the moral implications of scientific progress and the responsibility that comes with technological power. In doing so, the genre fosters political awareness and moral engagement.

Science fiction also contributes to the public understanding of science by humanizing complex scientific concepts. Through narrative, abstract concepts such as artificial intelligence or genetic engineering become accessible and emotionally resonant. This educational function increases the relevance of the genre in a world where scientific knowledge is increasingly shaped by the way it is understood.

In addition, science fiction provides imaginative spaces for exploring alternative futures. By envisioning worlds shaped by different social and technological choices, the section invites readers to rethink dominant narratives of progress and development. In this sense, science fiction functions as a form of speculative social critique that challenges critical views of the future.

Conclusion

The growth and development of science fiction as a literary genre reflects humanity's enduring fascination with science, technology, and the unknown. From its early origins in the works of Mary



Shelley, Jules Verne, and H. G. Wells to its contemporary manifestations in digital literature and popular culture, science fiction has continuously evolved in response to changing scientific and social circumstances. Its ability to combine imaginative speculation with critical inquiry has ensured its relevance throughout historical periods.

Early science fiction narratives established fundamental themes and narrative strategies that shape contemporary literature, film, and digital storytelling. Shelley's moral exploration of scientific ambition, Verne's celebration of scientific curiosity, and Wells' socio-political critique collectively defined the intellectual scope of the genre. These early works not only anticipated future technological developments, but also addressed enduring questions about human responsibility and moral accountability.

In the modern era, science fiction has evolved to encompass a variety of subgenres, theoretical perspectives, and national traditions. Concepts such as alienation, posthumanism, and techno-criticism underscore the genre's capacity to critically engage with technological realities. The rise of digital literature and cyberpunk narratives further demonstrates science fiction's adaptability and relevance in a technologically driven world.

Ultimately, science fiction remains an essential literary genre for understanding the complexities of the present and imagining possible futures. By questioning the relationship In this idea of the intersection between humanity and technology, critical awareness, moral reflection, and imaginative possibility are fostered. In doing so, science fiction plays a key role in shaping cultural narratives and intellectual discourses in the twenty-first century.

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