

Lecture #26 Thursday May 8, 2008 Aliens in SF

One of the most common tropes in SF is the alien or extraterrestrial. Aliens in SF typically represent The Other, in particular biological or cultural “otherness”

The Other actually represents non-dominant sections of our (American) society, particularly those who are “threatening” (women, people of color, homosexuals, non-Christian religion), or repressed portions in the dominant culture (both good and bad).

Often in SF aliens are merely exaggerations of human traits:

Vulcans: logical and rationality

Klingons: anger, pride, warlike

Aliens often represent anxiety about biology, for example, as parasites...

H.G. Wells wrote many novels about biological anxieties. In particular, *The War of the Worlds* is about the clash between imperialism and simple biology.

The invading Martians conquer the Earth, much like the British had a globe-spanning empire...but biology toppled the Martian empire (at the same time that the British empire was unraveling)

Not all alien encounters in SF are hostile.

The Day the Earth Stood Still: Klaatu comes to bring a message of peace and harmony to Earth, and is eventually killed.

2001: A Space Odyssey: the encounter with aliens transforms Dave Bowman into something new.

The Year's Best SF contains several stories about aliens

“In the River” by Justin Stanchfield

“Riding the Crocodile” by Greg Egan

“The Town on Blighted Sea” by A. M. Dellamonica

“Okanoggan Falls” by Carolyn Ives Gilman

Synopsis Near future story of alien occupation of Earth. Earth has been quietly conquered by the Wattsoons, humanoid but “squat lumps of rubbly khaki-colored skin, like blobs of clay mixed with gravel... An aroma like baking rocks entered the room with them – not unpleasant, just not a smell ordinarily associated with living creatures.”

Set in the small town of Okanoggan Falls, Wisconsin. The Wattsoons, lead by “Captain Groton,” wish to evacuated the Okanoggan Valley and to strip mine the land for pure silica (we later learn they use sand – silica – for hygiene).

The mayor, Tom Abernathy, and his wife, Susan, struggle over whether and how to resist. Fatefully, Susan befriends the aloof Captain Groton.

Groton: “Why are your people so found of being discontent? You relish resisting, protesting, always pushing against the inevitable...”

Susan: “...There are some things that *ought* to be protested.”

Groton: “Life is not just. Fairness is a fool’s concept.”

Groton becomes vaguely ill, seems to be undergoing a change.

As time passes, he starts to look more and more...human.

Groton explains: “On my planet, when a woman chooses a man, he becomes what she most wishes him to be.” (Wattsoons women also die while giving birth.)

Groton’s transformation was a physiological reaction to Susan’s touch.

In the end, the town is moved with little violence.

Groton says, “I am used to destroying the things I love.” He reveals he is being court-martialed for transforming into a human: “...we cannot risk becoming those we conquer... But still...It is unjust.”

Susan: It was then she knew that...she had won.

Analysis

The alien Wattsoons **invert** common tropes about aliens. Many SF aliens are slimy (reflecting our own fear of biology). The Wattsoons, however, are dry, and themselves are horrified by *human* “slimyness:” our tears, our mucous, our bathrooms.

They also see us as soft, weak, childish.

This is another story where biology = destiny. By becoming human, Groton is viewed as a traitor. He also starts accepting human ideas of justice, even if futile.

The story also suggests that winning minds is a better strategy than violent struggle (cf. Gandhi, MLK Jr.)