

Evolution of science fiction assignment



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

One of the earliest successful science fiction stories was *Frankincense*, written by Mary Shelley. Since the publishing of that novel, the world and imagery in science fiction novels that would follow would grow to encompass more expansive ideas, images, including other worlds, other dimensions, and vivid alien-like creatures to help tell these richly bizarre, yet human stories.

In this paper, Mary Shelley's *Frankincense*, H. G. Wells' *The Time Machine* and Samuel R. Delany's *Babel-17* will be used as prime examples of this evolution over nearly 150 years of science fiction writing. First published in 1818, *Frankincense* was a story that was set throughout Europe in a then-modern time and place. Everything about the lives of the characters within the story was completely within the human experience, as we know it, sans the creation of, and the existence of *The Creature*.

From the very beginning, we begin to establish a familiar, earthly setting, as chapter one opens with the line, "I am by birth a Genesee" (Shelley 14). The author continues making various connections wrought the story. In chapter eleven, the Creature says, "I sought a place where I could receive shade. This was the forest near Inconstant" (Shelley 71), and "I left Switzerland with you; I crept along the shores of the Rhine, among its willow islands, and over the summits of its hills.

I have dwelt many months in the heaths of England, and among the deserts of Scotland" (Shelley 122). Effectively, Shelley has described a world that is very easy for the reader to imagine, since it is a world that we are very much a part of. There are no fantastic elements introduced, in terms of the setting of the story, as those elements are saved for the description and actions of

The Creature, himself. In the creation and menacing of The Creature, Shelley begins to let her imagination run into otherworldly Images that we so often connect to science fiction.

Shelley describes the monster: “ His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath” and continues, “ but these luxuriance’s only formed a more horrid contrast with watery eyes, that seemed almost of the same color as the dun-white sockets in which they ere set, his shriveled complexion and straight black lips” (35). It Is In this and later references to the look and actions of The Creature that we see the writers imagination start to unleash.

But, being one of the earliest science fiction novels, so many important elements are glossed over, such as the moment that Frankincense gave life to his creation. We get no details of how that happened, but simply, “ I collected the instruments of life around me, that I might Infuse a spark of being into the lifeless thing that lay at my feet” (Shelley 35). One wonders, if this evolve had been written In later years, after the genre was better established, if more details of this creation might be more fully realized.

When we push forward to 1895 when The Time Machine by H. G. Wells was first published, we begin to see a strong progression Into Imaginary worlds, balanced by a world that we are more readily familiar with, Just like in the world of Frankincense. In 1 OFF Traveler, residing in Victorian England, hosting a dinner party at his house. In attendance are familiar types, such as the Psychologist, the Mayor, the Medical Man, t cetera, all types of people we

are very familiar with. Quickly, however, the story begins to steep itself in a world unlike any one could imagine.

Propelling himself forward in time, he encounters a futuristic society whose people are described as “ perhaps four feet high”, “ legs were bare to the knees and his head was bare”, “ very beautiful and graceful creature, but indescribably frail. His flushed face reminds me of a more beautiful kind of consumptive” (Wells 25). Beyond the slight images of the people initially encountered, we begin to see a world unlike anything we’ve experienced as readers. The Traveler describes this land as “ a tangled waste of beautiful bushes and flowers, a long-neglected and yet heedless garden (Wells 28).

Yet, even with the descriptions of an imagined futuristic world in the year 802, 701 , there are still recognizable elements from our society, simply displaced in another time. Later in the novel, the Traveler and his companion enter a museum filled with artifacts that we know from our time. Probably the most fantastic elements in this story come with the description of the Morocco’s, who are blinded by light and live underground. But even through it all, we have a story that paints a world that is arguably both familiar and unfamiliar to us in near equal parts.

This shows that over the years since Frankincense was published, minds were beginning to run a little more wildly, but had not quite yet created whole societies on other planets, filled with creatures and circumstances that are almost entirely foreign to the reader. In 1966, Samuel R. Delaney wrote Babel-17, almost 150 years following the publishing of Mary Shelley Frankincense. In this novel, we see encounter a historian extraterrestrial

society engaged in an intergalactic war through a mysterious language called Babel-17.

This novel, quite unlike *Frankincense* and *The Time Machine* is dense with imagery, describing people and places in rich detail, but quite open to interpretation to the reader, as it is wholly imagined. Of the people, Delaney describes a strong tendency for something called cosmetologist, where beings are embellished with elements, something like a three-dimensional tattoo. One of the characters is described: “ He’s an Earthman. Though I believe he was born en route from Arcata’s to one of the Centaur’s. His mother was a Slug, I think” (Delaney 26).

Among this society, there is a rather accepted element of the corporate and id’s-corporate, which is essentially boiled down to living beings (corporate) and ghostly beings (discorporate), all of whom have a very specific function in this world that Samuel R. Delaney created. In these very cursory details of each story, we see a strong evolution from a more familiar, but fictional world, to an entirely unfamiliar world. No doubt, as one work inspired another, each author built upon the works of previous writers and continued to expand the boundaries of not only the stories being told, but in the worlds that each of these stories live in.