

Scary new world the cynical vision of science fiction essay examples

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Science fiction is a fairly new genre in the spectrum of literature; the earliest practitioners include Mary Shelley, H. G. Wells and even Mark Twain (if you've read *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, then you've read an early work of science fiction) – both of whom wrote in the nineteenth century. Some of this has a lot to do with the fact that science and technology did not really take off until the early 1800's, which brought the Industrial Revolution. What with steam engines powering vast machines, the imagination of writers soon foresaw the wonders that those machines could bring to fruition. Because readers tend to prefer conflict over the ideal, the visions of science fiction authors have tended to look at the darker side of humanity – and the darker side of science. Whether the experiment in question was Victor Frankenstein's desire to defeat death, the attempts of humans on Earth to colonize Mars, or the use of communication technology to maintain order, the visions of science fiction authors have served to distort the true potential of science in the view of their readers.

Did I request thee, Maker, from my clay

An ethical consideration that Victor Frankenstein never mentions, at any point in his deliberations about bringing the dead back to life, is the right of the dead to stay that way. He fashions his creature out of the parts of several different corpses, stitching parts together with reckless abandon to come up with the body that will best fit together. Small matter that he is violating all sorts of existing legal and ethical boundaries, such as digging up graves and trying to undo death, but he also has not considered the effect of creation on the created. While Frankenstein is caught up in the wonder of his own discovery, he does not ponder how the creature will respond to his own

life. The creature awakens to find himself disgusting to others, a source of fear. His strength is superhuman, which allows him to vent his wrath at his own creation, but he wishes that he had never been made.

No one has yet figured out how to reanimate dead corpses, so it is difficult to argue that Frankenstein has made modern science look malevolent.

However, the colonization in Mars that takes place in Ray Bradbury's *The Martian Chronicles* makes most of humanity's modern scientific achievements look like a steady march toward the ruin of the planet, through pollution and nuclear holocaust. The motivation for the colonization is the fact that Earth is dwindling in resources, as well as the fact that nuclear war is on the verge of breaking out. The humans show up on Mars in several waves over the course of the book, and different fates befall the different expeditions. The Martians clearly have some idea that the humans will not benefit them, or their planet, as on one expedition, the Martians have taken on the appearance of the humans' loved ones from home. They lure the humans into a sense of comfort, and then when they are asleep, in beds that mysteriously look like places they slept when they were younger, the Martians slaughter the humans. Another expedition ends up decimating the Martian population, thanks to the contagious diseases that the humans bring with them from Earth, against which the humans had built up a sense of immunity – a parallel of the experience that the Native Americans in North America had once European settlers showed up, teeming with the deadly bacteria to which the Europeans were immune. Still another expedition ends up with a human family taking on the appearance of Martians, begging the

question of the origin of the first Martians who were there, expecting the arrival of the humans. These three expeditions make the fruits of human science seem to be far more about destruction and waste in the name of progress' sake than all about progress itself. After all, just as Victor Frankenstein did not ask his creature whether it wanted to be brought to life, neither did the planners on Earth communicate with Mars, in order to ask if settling the planet would be acceptable.

So much has been done, exclaimed the soul of Frankenstein –

More, far more, will I achieve; treading in the steps already marked,
I will pioneer a new way, explore unknown powers, and

Unfold to the world the deepest mysteries of creation. (Shelley)

This is Victor Frankenstein's statement to his friend, Walton, about his inspiration to find out the secret of life. Waldman, his chemistry professor, has lectured his classes about the possibilities that await them, and Victor is passionate about the idea of discovering the secret of life – a passion that is as contagious as it is frightening.

Scientists in many different fields have forayed out into research and study driven by passions just as compelling as that which fuels Victor Frankenstein. In modern times, the story of Steve Jobs has been cited as an example of the pursuit of one's scientific dreams, and the ways in which pursuing those dreams can bring fulfillment. For the majority of his professional life, Jobs battled professional frustration, as the company that he and Steve Wozniak

had started in a garage, Apple, flourished for many years after their first computer entered the market.

Indeed, he ended up being fired by his own board of directors. However, he never altered his vision, which sought to change the way people and their technology interact with one another. The idea of the computer mouse, which is now a universal peripheral, was one of his ideas with the Macintosh. While many users raved about the benefits of the Mac over the PC format, licensing issues kept it from receiving the widespread acceptance that the PC originally did. As the calendar turned into the 21st century, though, his ideas came roaring back, and the iPod, iPad and iPhone have fundamentally changed the way people view listening to music, purchasing a cellular communications device, and taking the Internet with them. Jobs' insights about the interactions between people and their technology turned into a series of advertising campaigns that helped Apple take the dominant share of the market. As he put it, he wanted to make products that sat "at the intersection of art and technology" (Kane and Fowler).

George Orwell, however, had a very different view of technological devices that enhanced the ability of humans to interact with one another and with their technology. The world of his novel, *1984*, is filled with gadgets that would not come into production for decades: every person's home is outfitted with telescreens that allow monitoring of the activity going on in each room. The privilege of turning these telescreens off is reserved only for such elite Party members as O'Brien. An elaborate system of microphones and cameras is in place throughout the nation of Oceania, so that workers

within the Ministry of Love can watch for acts of disloyalty towards Big Brother, which would lead to further “training.” These sorts of technological advances have appeared in our own time – surveillance cameras, two-way monitors and sensitive microphones are readily available. Such scenes as the huge surveillance room in *The Simpsons Movie*, filled with people listening in to Americans but never finding any fugitives – until three of the Simpsons end up on a train in Seattle – poke fun at this idea, without the malevolence that appears in Orwell’s novel. When this surveillance equipment catches Winston Smith and ends up leading to his imprisonment – and electroshock therapy, among other strategies – it is seen as a tool of horror. Obviously, all of this technology also has far more benevolent purposes, as not everyone who wants a wireless microphone wants to spy on others, and not everyone who wants a two-way monitor wants to keep an eye on the activities of others. There are many helpful uses for those appliances as well, but Orwell (and many dystopian writers like him) focus on the dark and the secretive.

I saw – with shut eyes, but acute mental vision – I saw the pale student of unhallowed arts

Kneeling beside the thing he had put together. I saw the hideous phantasm of a man stretched

Out, and then, on the working of some powerful engine, show signs of life and stir with an

Uneasy, half-vital motion. Frightful must it be, for supremely frightful would

be the effect of any

Human endeavor to mock the stupendous mechanism of the
Creator of the world. (Shelley)

This encapsulates the fears that science fiction has engendered in its readers almost since the beginning of the genre. When Victor Frankenstein begins his experimentation, he toys with the very fabric of existence, the powers that religion has long ascribed to God – rather than man. This “stupendous mechanism” that Shelley references in the novel is the schedule of life and death; the fruits of that mockery will chase Victor Frankenstein the rest of his life. The creature, disgusted with himself, comes back to demand a mate, a woman with whom to spend his life. Frankenstein, horrified by what he has made, refuses; as a result, the creature kills Frankenstein’s own beloved, at which point Frankenstein decides to chase the creature down, caring so little for his own life that he chases a faster, stronger creature across the wastes of the Arctic. While the products of science have indeed brought instances of horror to the planet, the good that science has wrought has more than outdone the awful uses to which humans have occasionally put it. Unfortunately, heartwarming stories don’t appeal to the masses – and so science fiction writers take us down dark, lonely paths that almost never lead to redemption.

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