

The chrysalids: a science fiction novel

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“ It's often said that Science Fiction is the literature of change. ” (Treitel).

When a society is going through a period in which they develop many new technologies, science fiction stories often emerge. The feelings and fears of that society are expressed in science fiction. The Chrysalids, a science fiction novel, incorporates characteristics of its genre by being set in a different world, by relating to current events and by showing how destructive power can be. Setting plays a prominent role in defining a science fiction story. Science fiction texts are often set in the future, in space, on a different world, or in a different universe or dimension. ” (“ Definition”). John Wyndham's novel, The Chrysalids, is set centuries in the future. “ But, Uncle, if we don't try to be like the Old People and rebuild the things that have been lost, what can we do? ” (Wyndham 79). The word science fiction brings to mind futuristic worlds full of whirring machines and shiny metals. This novel takes an alternate approach; it shows a world so devastated by nuclear war that it has actually regressed, and yet it is still a possible future.

In addition to being set in the future, this novel shows a changed Earth. “ ... An Offense was sometimes quite an impressive occasion... My father... would call us all together, including everyone who worked on the farm. We would all kneel while he proclaimed our repentance and led prayers for forgiveness. The next morning we would all be up before daylight and gather in the yard. As the sun rose we would sing a hymn while my father ceremonially slaughtered the two-headed calf, four-legged chicken, or whatever kind of Offense it happened to be. ” (Wyndham 18).

The world John Wyndham has created is so different from the current reality, it is almost a separate entity. In the fictional reality, the people are terrified

of anything different from what they perceive to be the norm. They kill, burn or cast out anything considered to be a deviation. This setting allows the writer to explore terrifying concepts with distance while still creating parallels with current societies. Setting is a vital part of any science fiction story. Furthermore, science fiction relates to current events. “ Good [science fiction]... can provide us with fascinating thought experiments to while away the hours, or extrapolate future dystopias from the politics of the present; it can generate visions of tomorrow's world, or of worlds eons hence; it can warn or it can soothe... ” (Clute 6). The Chrysalids explores the impact of nuclear weapons. “ The whole seaboard is empty – black and harsh and empty. The land looks like a huge desert of charcoal. Where there are cliffs they are sharp-edged, with nothing to soften them. There are no fish in the sea there, no weed either, not even slime, and when a ship has sailed there the barnacles and the fouling on her bottom drop off, and leave her hull clean.

You don't see any birds. Nothing moves at all, except the waves breaking on the black beaches. ” (Wyndham 60). This novel was first published in 1955, shortly after World War II and at a time when many people were protesting the use of nuclear bombs. People saw the destruction these weapons were capable of and they were afraid. The Chrysalids is a response to that fear; it shows one possible future. Propaganda is another issue discussed in The Chrysalids. “ Not ashamed! Not ashamed of producing a mockery of your Maker – not ashamed of trying to tempt your own sister into criminal conspiracy!

The enemies of God besiege us. They seek to strike at Him through us. Unendingly they work to distort the true image; through our weaker vessels they attempt to defile the race. You have sinned, woman... You have produced a defilement... A baby which, if you were to have your way, would grow up to breed, and, breeding, spread pollution until all around us there would be mutants and abominations. ” (Wyndham 72). In 1955, the Cold War was in full swing. Spies and secrets abounded while children were told that the other side is evil and propaganda slowly poisoned their minds.

Eventually, they believe the lies. Joseph Storm truly believes what he is saying; he feels that his sister-in-law should kill her newborn child, rather than let it grow and eventually have children of its own. Science fiction often incorporates concerns of the author and the general public at that time. Additionally, science fiction often involves the misuse of power. “[Science fiction] suggests the possibility of scientific discovery going too far, taking on a God-like power that leads to disaster. ” (Quinn) In *The Chrysalids* there are two examples of destructive power.

Firstly, there is nuclear power. “ This is a dreadful country indeed... There are stretches, miles across, where it looks as if all the ground has been fused into black glass; there is nothing else... It goes on and on... What did they do here? What can they have done to create such a frightful place?... It must be utterly beyond hope, barred to any kind of life for ever and ever... There was the power of gods in the hands of children, we know: but were they mad children, all of them quite mad?... The mountains are cinders and the plains are black glass – still, after centuries! ” (Wyndham 179).

Power is a dangerous thing, as evidenced by the burned mountains and plains of glass discussed in this novel. Power is a popular topic for science fiction stories because so many people crave it, despite its poor history and bleak future. The Chrysalids looks at the consequences of nuclear warfare and the idea that this kind of power is not meant for human hands. The second type of power explored in The Chrysalids, is the power of conformity. “ According to Ethics, mankind... was in the process of climbing back into grace; we were following a faint and difficult trail which led up to the peaks from which we had fallen...

There was only one true trail, and by following it we should, with God's help and in His own good time, regain all that had been lost... Only the authorities, ecclesiastical and lay, were in a position to judge whether the next step was a rediscovery, and so, safe to take; or whether it deviated from the true re-ascent, and so was sinful. ” (Wyndham 40). As a race attempting to rebuild its society, conformity and a deference to authority figures would have been beneficial. However, change is necessary for growth.

Having a world full of people like Joseph Storm, who fear change as a deviation from the true path, will bring about the destruction of that society. In The Chrysalids, authority figures force everyone to conform to their idea of what is right and what is sinful. This kind of power is dangerous and, at the end of book, brings about the death of Joseph Storm and many like him. Destructive power is a popular theme in science fiction novels. Due to its

setting, relation to reality and demonstration of various destructive powers, The Chrysalids is clearly a science fiction novel.

Science fiction can be many things; it can be educational, providing lessons and morals that apply to real life scenarios; it can be a warning, showing the readers a possible or a probable fate; or it can simply take the reader on a fantastic journey, flying through space and time. Above all science fiction is about change. “ Life is change, that is how it differs from the rocks, change is its very nature. ” (Wyndham 182). The Chrysalids, and science fiction in general, teaches that nothing in life is static.