

Diamond age



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The Diamond Age “ The Diamond Age or, A Young Lady's Illustrated Primer” is a masterful work of science fiction in which author Neal Stephenson finds new ways to express many of the classic science fiction themes we have learned about throughout our class. A few of the many themes covered in this novel include the responsibility a creator has to his or her creation, including a parent’s responsibility to properly raise and nurture their child to help them find their place in society, as well as how future technologies, such as artificial intelligence and nanotechnology, will impact our lives and our society.

Although the story at first appears to be a more traditional cyberpunk tale, going so far as to include a Johnny Mnemonic-type character with a weapon hardwired to his brain and an occupation locating and transferring sensitive data, it soon reveals a much more complicated environment and plot. The harsh and exacting means by which this character exits the story is a hint by the author that this is more than just the usual cyberpunk tale, although it certainly seems to build on the type of setting popularized by William Gibson. This cyberpunk theme is taken to a new level through the existence of The Feed.

The Feed is not simply an information network, but a network which supplies raw materials to matter compilers which can create virtually anything at an atomic level, so of course, control and access to The Feed are contested by the different factions that exist in this future, although they all must abide by the widely distributed and strictly enforced Common Economic Protocol. There is a noticeable Dickensian feel, although it is heavily influenced by cyberpunk, in the way the author organizes the cultures of this future

society, including a main character named Nell, patterned after Charles Dickens character from "The Old Curiosity Shop".

As in that novel, the main character Nell is a young girl who is attempting to find ways to be self-reliant, despite of being a member of a poor, unaffiliated class. This Dickensian theme is reinforced by a description of a bleak, dystopian society in which children often have to fend for themselves and individuals are constantly tracked through the use of nano-spores, microscopic sensors which allow their creators to track any type of data. The first part of the title refers to the progression of human technology to an age in the not-too-distant future where nanotechnology has become a reality.

The Diamond Age refers to the point at which nanotechnology enables manipulation of atoms so that any material may be engineered inexpensively and safely. Nanotechnology permeates every aspect of society, for better or worse. In many cases, the science is used for illicit purposes, such as illegal information gathering or the ability to breach an enemy's circulatory system with tiny explosives known as "cutters". In another example of the author's brilliant attention to detail, he scientifically describes the counter-espionage and tactics that occur during adversaries attempts to evade each other's invisible nano-tech tools.

Each of these nano-gadgets has a specific form and function, as well as a specific signature, which may or may not identify their creator. This "Big Brother" gathering of information is not conducted by the government. The near future described in the book incorporates the breakdown of traditional nations. In place of traditional governments there arise powerful alliances,

so-called phyles, groups of individuals who share a similar cultural or political orientation. Most unaffiliated individuals are reduced to a life of sorrow and disenfranchisement.

In this future, globalization and commerce have allowed these groups to become exceedingly powerful and supersede the function of traditional countries. The implications of nanotechnology overwhelm the states' ability to collect taxes and provide services, so people must rely on these conglomerates for almost everything. One of the more powerful and well-established groups are the Neo-Victorians, who follow a sort of retro-modernism culture, which includes a strict adherence to styles and mannerisms borrowed from the Victorian age.

They control much of the wealth and high tech industry, which really means controlling information, since traditional industrial production has been replaced by matter compilers which allow anything to be created from its elements by arranging the component atoms, using nanotechnology and its miniaturized means of production. The Neo-Victorians are the most disciplined phyle, living in protected areas which have been planned and beautifully recreated to incorporate engineered natural beauty. They are extremely concerned with Protocol Enforcement and are considered to have all the trappings of the establishment, including complacency.

The second element of the title refers to a specialized learning tool commissioned by the powerful head of a Neo-Victorian nanotechnology firm. He instructs his best engineer to create a one-of-a-kind, interactive, multimedia educational device which will bond to its user based on that

user's specific interests and abilities. The hope is that this will allow the commissioner's granddaughter to rise above the complacency and conformity that has befallen the Neo-Victorians, allowing her to lead a more individual and productive existence.

When the engineer pirates a copy for himself to give to his own daughter, he is subsequently mugged by our main character Nell's brother, who gives her this amazing device for her own use. Elizabeth, the intended recipient of the original Primer, is only mentioned in passing during the course of the book. She winds up becoming a rebel who defects from the Neo-Victorian phyle of her parents to "CryptNet", a group composed of programmers and hackers who attempt to control the world's computer systems, including The Feed, through nefarious means.

This rebellion is described not as the result of the Primer's affect on her, but because of the restrictive Neo-Victorian environment that her parents raised her in. Our main character, Nell, benefits so much from this type of education that she is eventually welcomed into the Neo-Victorian phyle, attending the same school as the intended recipients of the Primer. This is another theme throughout the novel, the idea that anyone is capable of great things if they are provided with the best educational tools and that equal access to information is important to advance society as a whole.

People should not be limited by their circumstances, in the present or the future. The parallels to the internet and our own information age are obvious, but the author expands on this concept to create a very realistic future, the seeds of which have been planted in or current society. " The

"Diamond Age" describes real possibilities for our future while incorporating themes that transcend time or technology, including nature versus nurture and difficulty in governing and maintaining nation-states within man-made boundaries.

It also describes a future in which nanotechnology has been perfected, but society has not. The author does an excellent job of reminding us that the future is likely to be fraught with the same perils that have always faced mankind, despite whatever technology there is to mitigate these troubles. He is able to create a realistic future in which problems are not necessarily solved with simple answers. If anything he shows how, in many situations, a solution to a problem creates its own problems.

He seems optimistic in his writing, despite the fact that it is likely that there will continue be a distinction between the haves and have-nots. These issues should not discourage people from trying to do their best and make things better for themselves and society. As we've learned in our discussions, there are, and will likely always be, obstacles which much be overcome, be it through technological advances or advances in the way people deal with each other as individuals. Even in the future, humans are likely to continue to be able to solve problems that technology is unable to resolve.