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To the Stars and Back Among Earthlings: An Exploration of Science Fiction Women Writers from Mary Shelley to Ursula K. LeGuin

Abstract: The present paper aims to trace the feminine and feminist presence in science fiction literature since its commonly accepted beginning, following several examples of women authors who through their work managed to capture the essence of change, to challenge the norm and to even give viable alternatives to what centrality meant in their respective times. If science fiction is a genre of alternatives, different futures or new beginnings, then the parallels with feminism as a current, literary, cultural, and even philosophical, are inescapable. In various stages, the works and concepts analyzed below present blueprints of social contexts and cultural milieus which mediate conversations around the notions of gender, equality, and representation, just as valid and relevant today as at the time of their writing.

Keywords: science fiction, feminism, cultural studies, thought experiment, intersectionality, interdisciplinarity.

> *We decided, therefore, that the striking coherence we noticed in literature by women could be explained by a common, female impulse to struggle free from social and literary confinement through strategic redefinitions of self, art, and society.* (Gilbert & Gubar 1979*,* xi-xii)

Rarilh [ɾɑɾɪɬ] is a word in Láadan, a constructed language designed to express the life experiences of women, which encodes the concept behind the drive of feminist literary researchers during the 1970s and 1980s. It defines the feeling which moved Elaine Showalter to make reparations for the western world's literature in 1977 with *A Literature of Their Own,* or Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in 1979 with *The Madwoman in the Attic.*

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Less known and three years earlier than Showalter's now seminal work, in 1974 Pamela Sargent is moved by the same motivation to put together the first number of an anthology, *Women of Wonder: Science-fiction Stories by Women about Women*. By 1983 there was still a need for addressing this issue, as Joanna Russ writes *How to Suppress Women's Writing,* a carefully curated selection of opinions about women and women's writing in a patriarchal context from both literature and criticism existent at the time. This tradition, thus started, never stopped and is now carried on by scholars such as Lisa Yaszek and her *The Future Is Female!* with its second volume published in 2022 .

Rarilh has the following definition in Suzette Haden Elgin's *Dictionary of Láadan*: "to deliberately refrain from recording; for example the failure throughout history to record the accomplishments of women [ra=non- + ri= to record, keep records + lh=negative connotation]" (Elgin 1985). As the definition suggests, the word is not limited to women's achievements, it refers to any and all history or events consciously unrecorded or deleted from the record with evil intent. The present discussion, however, will necessarily bring into focus only the example given by Elgin, the creator of this language, in the dictionary and even narrow it down to the achievements of women in Science Fiction literature written in English in an attempt to highlight the common pleas of both the genre and the women's movement. Further, it may also add to the proof of the undeniable mark women left on the genre, shifting it into what it is today. The metamorphosis of the genre from pulp to the "space opera" of the incipient years to the complex experimental tool good science fiction can be today is neither uniform, nor complete as the authors engaging with it are not part of a breed of hive minded creatures bent on taking over the world — an image of antagonists very often met in SF stories of all times — nor is it final. They are as diverse as the topics they propose and thus the genre continues to evolve with every generation. Finally, this change is not owed exclusively to the intervention of women, yet women did play a major role in opening eyes and literary doors and that is precisely what will be analyzed henceforth.Until the restorationist work of the mid 70s to the 80s, history was usually quick to asses that most great writers were men up until a point, or that science fiction was written by men and for men almost exclusively. As such, in Elaine Showalter's words:

"Having lost sight of the minor novelists, who were the links in the chain that bound one generation to the next, we have not had a very clear understanding of the continuities in women's writing, nor any reliable information about the

relationship between the writer's lives and the changes in the legal, economic and social status of women." (Showalter 2020, 7)

The following section will attempt to highlight some of those links that are certainly there, albeit hardly seen in science fiction, and in doing so, build on the now rich tradition of *écriture féminine*. While indeed fewer women than men wrote in this field, they are by no means few and they truly wrote themselves into their texts in such a seamless way, as if pre-echoing what Helene Cixous would write a century and more later: "I write woman: woman must write woman" and again, "she must write herself, because this is the invention of a *new insurgent* writing which, when the moment of her liberation has come, will allow her to carry out the indispensable ruptures and transformations in her history" (Cixous 880). Before proceeding with the chronicle of some of the texts unearthed by these venerable literary archaeologists, one more mention must be made regarding the meaning of women's writing. The definition of this notion must be extended here to adapt to these times of proto-science fiction and protofeminism, and at least for its beginning it must mean "literature by women", not necessarily feminist or reactionary literature in which these women pioneered their tradition as their imagination was not limited to – nor by literary criticism simply because there was no theoretical framework for any at the time. The first text predates the periods Elaine Showalter coins as "*Feminine, Feminist* and *Female*" and, as we will see, it resists classification in either period, enforcing *avant la lettre* Showalter's conclusion to her own system, that "these are obviously not rigid categories, distinctly separable in time" (Showalter 2020, 13). Since it does not deal with roles in society, or anything having to do with women really, it may be overlooked altogether by feminist readers, yet it does offer a powerful example of a woman who made her voice heard, created history and more, drew the blueprint for at least two distinct literary genres, science fiction and horror.

The Beginnings of a Tradition

In 1818, at the time of the publication of *Frankenstein; or, The New Prometheus*, feminism was but the seedling of an idea, albeit it a known and very strong one in the heart, mind, and pen of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley's mother, and her *Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), but fairly obscure and ignored by the society not involved in the early suffrage movement. Even though according to some critics Shelley did not share her mother's progressive views in full, she does manage to put herself in her writing, as she created a text which deviates from the norm in some key

aspects consistent with what later came to be the science fiction "thought variant". In the preface to the 1831 edition of *Frankenstein*, she recounts the process of creating the work. She writes of her early attempts at stories as a child: "I was not confined to my own identity, and I could people the hours with creations far more interesting to me at that age than my own sensations" (Wollstonecraft Shelley 2017, 292), indicating that the literary legacy she inherited from both her patents helped her experiment with worlds outside her immediate tangible existence. Further, she makes a point of presenting her husband as the main proponent of her literary career and the one who persuaded her to return to stories written. It was while traveling with him that she got the idea for *Frankenstein*. Of the work itself she makes two mentions that draw the attention of the modern reader and place her in both main lines analyzed in this chapter. During the visit they paid Lord Byron in Switzerland: "many and long were the conversations between Lord Byron and Shelley, to which I was a devout but nearly silent listener" (Wollstonecraft Shelley 2017, 293). One of these conversations, regarding reanimation based on some of Erasmus Darwin's research, was the spark which ignited her imagination, yet the last clarification regarding her near silence is the indication that she was not a Victorian subservient woman. Including it when she could have just as well left this detail out, inevitably draws attention to the fact that even though she had been invited and encouraged to write, while the men were debating science, she remained a "nearly silent listener". It is simply an extra layer added to her creativity and determination. Both Byron and Shelley were poets and philosophers, not scientists, thus perhaps knew as much about Darwin and Galvani as she did and from the same publications to which she undoubtedly had unrestrained access. This view is supported by a second mention: "I certainly did not owe the suggestion of one incident, not scarcely of one train of feeling, to my husband" (Wollstonecraft Shelley 2017, 294) making it clear that she claims full authorship and originality of the material. This may have been prompted by various opinions appeared between the original publication of the novel in 1818 and the one prefaced by these words in 1931, otherwise again, she would not have felt the need to clarify this particular aspect. She continues by crediting her husband with what he was owed, namely: "yet but for his incitement, [the work] would never have taken the form in which it was presented. From this declaration I must except the preface [to the first edition]. As far as I can recollect, it was entirely written by him" (Wollstonecraft Shelley 2017, 294). This is a woman who claims what is hers and who freely speaks her mind in writing.

With this in mind, one must approach *Frankenstein* as the first work of science fiction in recorded literature. Just as important is that a woman very certain of her value wrote it. A simple argument can be made as an answer to those who read *Frankenstein* through its historical confines alone, rendering the author's achievement as something coincidental. Indeed, the text seems to be a warning at first glance: "Learn from me, if not by my precepts, at least by my example, how dangerous is the acquirement of knowledge and how much happier that man is who believes his native town to be the world, than he who aspires to become greater than his nature will allow" (Wollstonecraft Shelley 2017, 31). Seeing it as a reaction to technology and radicalism is a trap of appearance easily fallen into, however. It is a warning, but of a different kind. Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley was herself an educated woman, daughter of two established writers and thinkers, married to another. Such a member of the British intelligentsia could not have militated against the "acquirement of knowledge". Moreover, Shelley endowed the Creature with the full range of humanity: love, language, empathy, sorrow, with desire for love, hope, regret, all perfectly represented in full through the final monologue:

Once I falsely hoped to meet with beings who, pardoning my outward form, would love me for the excellent qualities which I was capable of unfolding. I was nourished with high thoughts of honour and devotion. But now crime has degraded me beneath the meanest animal (Wollstonecraft Shelley 2017, 142).

The monster then, who had acquired knowledge himself, must stand for more than simply the evil of societal and industrial advancement. Finally, the creature was not punished with destruction, she let him live. Though the novel does end with his solemn promise of self destruction, Walton, who through the entirety of the text serves as the eye witness validating Victor Frankenstein's wild scientific claims, does not validate the final, most important one, that of anti-creation. This alone should serve as proof that *Frankenstein* is not an elaborate fable fearing technology and that Shelley does not imitate the conservative views of her time, but that instead she invites a conversation, albeit a monstrous one. In excluding the undeniable proof of the reversal of creation, she uses her own voice to pose a rather difficult question which the reader is prevailed upon to answer — whether or not the creature kept his promise. From the comfort of the postmodern, posthuman history, Frankenstein's creature may be seen as a victim in search of a humanity he can never attain because of the shortcomings of his creator. The creature did not ask to be brought into the world and was not given any tools for learning how to live, was not given

any love or mere care. The postmodern reader is compelled to wonder how the story would unfold if he had had all of these.

What Mary Shelley did was to blend the gothic with something new, something full of awe at the time, the creation of life in a new fashion — through technology. Certainly it was not new for humanity to desire to emulate godhood and the ultimate enactment of this desire is that of creation, the power over life itself. Stories about promethean humans, necromancers, golems and other (re)animated lifeforms date before Frankenstein's Creature and in many different cultures around the globe, yet all was done through magic or alchemy. What is novel here is that Victor Frankenstein tames the power of the thunder with the help of electrodes, in line with contemporary discoveries. Along with these discoveries however, Frankenstein's creature does indeed reflect the anxieties of its society in regards to the new and rapid technological development. What has been proven above is that this anxiety is not merely approached with fear, but with a sense of responsibility which aptly and perhaps ironically named Victor and his newly acquired power over life, lack, and for this he is punished. The subtle shift in understanding the complexity of the text is made possible because Mary Shelley allowed for it by nuancing her characters, not merely stopping at sheer shock value and the desire to scare. It was because she wrote herself in the text as she wrote a theme vastly different than the mainstream literature of her time and completely free from any confines, bringing the available science they had to life.

If during her time such scenarios as that of *Frankenstein* would be placed in the realm of horror fiction, Shelley herself confessing she wanted to write a scary story in the preface of the 1831 edition, reading this story today no longer scares its readers, in appearance at least, as humanity takes pride in having overcome such early, perhaps superstitious and incomplete depictions of technology. In reality however, the paradox of wishing to create life and fearing the new creation or its possible rise against its creator is more present today than ever. What started as an electrically risen monster who slowly gained sentience by mimicking its surroundings, transformed into the androids of the 1950s stories which are a very near reality today. Its sentience has turned today into the software capable of processing unthinkable amounts of information and into the artificial intelligence which learns by emulation, more intelligent and autonomous than ever. Both mirror what Mary Shelley presented and warned against more than two hundred years ago. Contemporary science fiction still tries to answer her question by looking at human creation in all its possible and impossible aspects.

The next two works presented were written by multi-genre writers, contributors to pulp magazines, as science fiction did not solidify itself as a field until the late 1920s, nor was scientific accuracy sought after at the time:

> Much early American science fiction, written for the pulps, concentrated on adventure involving larger-than-life characters. There was usually a minimum of scientific accuracy; many stories were actually closer to fantasy than science fiction. (Sargent 1979, xix).

Among their merits however, was to form and inform the generations which refined the art of scribing science into fiction much like Mary Shelley. The end of the 19th century is a time when more women joined the ranks of writers for pay, satisfying Showalter's condition for the focus of her study. But if in the Victorian era she feels that "the novelists publicly proclaimed, and sincerely believed, their antifeminism. By working in the home, by preaching submission and self-sacrifice, and by denouncing female self-assertiveness, they worked to atone for their own will to write" (Showalter 2020, 21), there is no such sense in the writers of pulps, specifically those precursor to science fiction. It seems that since before its beginning, this genre attracted women who wished to explore society in a way that the regular canon would not allow. Not all women did, yet among them there are those who would see things differently and do so in print. The narrators and main characters are still male most of the time but the authors find ways towards fine and sometimes subtle, sometimes very direct criticism to the state of facts in American fiction during this time.

Elizabeth Croom Bellamy, a novelist dealing with a variety of social topics in different genres, wrote towards the end of the 19th century. One of her stories however, "Ely's Automatic Housemaid" (1899), deals with science and starts with a positive account of what science can do, even if by the end it shifts its tone into a veritably sarcastic one. This positivism came to characterize many of the science fiction stories of the 1920s, where technology was mostly seen as a convenience and any problem that might ensue would be solved through the wit or the sheer power of will of the male protagonist. As the title suggests, it deals with veritable fully mechanical proto-androids *avant la lettre* who serve the household. These machines are not yet sentient nor fully autonomous, that is, they only function via input by their operator and towards a given task, they cannot make their own decisions outside of that, thus they are an early iteration of robotic servants. In terms of science, there is little explained beyond their description:

My friend's invention was shaped in the likeness of the human figure with body, head, arms, legs, hands and feet. It was clad in waterproof cloth, with a hood of the same to protect the head, and was shod with felt. The trunk contained the wheels and springs, and in the head was fixed the electric battery. The face, of bisque, was described as possessing 'a very natural and pleasing expression'. (Bellamy 2019, 65)

A few other components are mentioned here and there, yet the focus of these stories was hardly scientific accuracy; that was to come some twenty years later with Hugo Gernsback's editorship. It instead offers a humorous account of these human-like figures who fail in their tasks precisely because they could not possibly think for themselves. Beyond using some futuristic scientific entertainment, Bellamy also infuses the story with a sense of her societal *status quo*. The male first person narrator makes the account all the more delightful as it is written by a woman with the expectation that a husband may have in mind:

> Harrison Ely is one of the greatest geniuses the world has ever seen. He has invented an 'Automatic-Electric Machine-Servant.' My wife said 'Oh!' There was not an atom of enthusiasm in that 'Oh!' but I was not to be daunted.
>
> [...]
>
> 'Ah!' said my wife; and the enthusiasm that was lacking in the 'Oh!' made itself eloquent in that 'Ah!' 'What is the price?' she asked again. (Bellamy 2019, 66)

This short dialogue between spouses shows the keen eye of the author in matters social and familial, and more, the obvious sarcasm exposes the fact that the author was part of a generation determined to obtain equality and suffrage. Another element in support of this claim is that in such a science oriented story, the author plays within the trope of men getting excited about technological advancements while women are passive and uninterested. Written by a woman, it becomes a playful critique, all the more so when the man is just as lost and scared when dealing with the machines as the woman is, not playing the usual role of the savior. Finally, the two "Electric-Automatic Household Beneficent Geniuses", in short E.A.H.B.G. or simply B.G. by their official factory label, get women's names, Bridget and Juliana, both the names of former hired servants of the family. Naming what is basically a sophisticated appliance designed to do house chores is another statement meant to further stir the conversation of gender roles. The robotic B.G.s, a very subtle stand-in for Bridget and Juliana (the sound formation for "J" here is the same as the one in "genius", the [dʒ] sound), are clearly non-gendered thus the names could have been

neutral, but naming them based on their function around the household effectively forces the reader to acknowledge the tradition which constrains women into the role of the maid and that of a wife. Yet a deeper layer of criticism that can be extrapolated from this event is that the two B.G.s having no autonomy whatsoever, cannot have any input or opinion about the names they are given, they can only mechanically proceed to fulfill their tasks. Thus the text read by a signee of the *Declaration of Sentiments* fifty years prior to this story, would be able to contextualize it as social commentary, not just mere scientific-literary experiment.

Another story, more overtly challenging such traditions and the oppression of women is an earlier one, from 1892. Lillie Devereux Blake, a well known suffragette at the end of the 19th century and the president of the New York State Woman's Suffrage Association between 1879 and 1890 (Ashley 2015) wrote "A Divided Republic", a separationist utopian story where all women of the Old Colonies move to the West, beyond the Appalachians, with the mountain chain functioning as a natural border between the sexes. This story deals more with this speculative element than science fiction, yet it must be mentioned here specifically on account of it presenting such a divide while the suffrage movement was in full motion. It presents women as being ignored, disregarded and discredited in all matters political and social. Not only that, but no merits are credited by the men of their society: "Matters began actually to grow worse for women. The more honors they carried off at college the less were they allowed to hold places of public trust or given equal pay for equal work" (Blake 1892). They resolve to peacefully solve the issue for themselves and after a continental convention they leave and settle in "not Wyoming and Washington alone, but Idaho and Montana, and all the region between the two enfranchised territories" (Blake 1892) which they swiftly turn into a truly functioning society. They take on the jobs which men would have normally done with ease, they pass laws, they invest in education, they build railroads, in short, they thrive. Meanwhile, the society of men in the East falls apart due to unruly behavior, drunkenness, lack of care and a completely askew list of priorities, most of which have to do with entertainment, violent more often than not, and leisure time. When the situation gets too dire to stand, they concede to meet with the women and agree to their terms for return. Equal pay, the right to any official position, turning military facilities into schools, women will control liquor sales and more importantly, universal suffrage thus becomes the norm in this new America and all live happily ever after. A rather unexpected ending when it comes to such a utopian story though it may be, it does clearly state the position suffragist women had regarding

their belief in what society might look like should they be listened to. The story then becomes a reimagining of an American society which suffered because a vast portion of its population was not heard. This story is at once part of and precursor to many such utopian/dystopian reimaginings throughout the history of science fiction literature written by women, a subgenre blurring the lines between science fiction and speculative fiction, much associated with women's literature of the time.

Of course, utopias are not the only framework employed by women writers. By 1995 several large anthologies presenting more than seventy years of literary tradition (1920s to 1990s) and edited by both women and men have been dedicated to women writers in science fiction since Sargent's first *Women of Wonder*. All of them show tremendous diversity in themes, approach, style — in short, a literary world of one's own. To name a few of the earlier ones, Sargent herself published four editions in the *Women of Wonder* series between 1974 and 1995. Vonda McIntyre and Susan Janice Anderson published *Aurora: Beyond Equality* in 1976 and Jen Green and Sarah Lefanu *Despatches from the Frontiers of the Female Mind* in 1985. Sargent provides lists of further readings in three of her anthologies, but specifically in the last one, *Women of Wonder: The Contemporary Years,* covering the period between 1979 and 1993, she amasses around 340 titles comprising short stories, novels, novelettes, collected works and omnibusses, belonging to more than 140 women authors. She specifies that: "No ideological yardstick was used to measure these works; although they are all by women, some do not reflect a feminist sensibility" (Sargent 1995, 405), which is an important point for the entirety of the conversation focused around building a "feminine tradition" in science fiction - undoubtedly there is one, and it is rich.

If the 19th century saw such literature by women somewhat overlooked it was "because the first generation of pulp magazines that appeared in the 1890s, including *All-Story Weekly* and the *Black Cat*, were also multi-genre magazines targeting and featuring women writers" (Yaszek and Sharp 2016, xix). Works like "Divided Republic" were few among many romances, adventures and other ways literary expression was present in short form in these publications. Later on, when the pulps started transforming into science-oriented magazines, "more than 450 known women published SF in professional and amateur venues between 1926, when Hugo Gernsback created the first dedicated SF magazine, and 1945, when the end of World War II ushered in a new constellation of practitioners and periodicals" (Yaszek and Sharp 2016, xvii). According to Sargent, the numbers represent between 10 and 20 percent of the authors,

and other critics agree that these percentages are definitory for the presence of women in the field since its inception and until the 70s. A consequence of such a timid presence, during its first years at least, is that "most sf has been conservative in its depiction of future roles for women or has ignored them altogether" (Sargent 1978, xiv). Thus, since they did not get representation, there was very little to attract women to the genre. This was accounted for in several ways, one of which being that science is the domain and dominion of the man, not the woman, and by extrapolation, "that science fiction was basically a man's (or boy's) genre was not entirely true, yet it was also not entirely false" (Sargent 1978, xxiii). Somehow, it was made to be a boys' genre by attitudes towards girls' activities and questioning women's ability to write and understand scientific, or indeed utopian, devices. Hugo Gernsback encouraged women to write for his publications: "In 1927, just one year after he founded *Amazing*, Gernsback regretfully noted that women rarely made good SF authors, because their science education was all too often 'limited' by social convention" (Yaszek and Sharp 2016, xix). While this seems merely an observation based in his own reality, it shows what that reality was like, and more, that few would in fact do anything about the limitations of this social convention. Another example which also shows that not enough had changed by the 1970s comes from Gérard Klein, the French author and critic whom Joanna Russ quotes in *How to Suppress Women's Writing*. In talking about Ursula K LeGuin's *The Dispossessed* and *The Left Hand of Darkness,* he "attributes LeGuin's artistic success to her nurturant qualities [...] the fact that her art is the product of 'a happily resolved childhood, an active feminine genitality, and her intellectual indebtedness to her historian husband'" (qtd in Russ 2005, 162).

While this may be classified as textbook psychoanalytic criticism to some extent, it is extremely reductionist in that, according to this logic, a woman may only be successful if certain conditions outside her are met. Therefore the analysis clearly moved away from the quality and the artistic value of the work itself and presented the lens through which the critic superimposed values other than those the work itself yields. While looking for the innovative but denying that it could be attained, or alternatively, suggesting that when found, its merits are solely due to external factors, some of which might be construed as insulting to the artist, one admits one's own limitations by various conventions, not only social, but cultural, educational, etc. Russ goes on on to conclude that "even a critic looking for new values recognizes them best when he can mistake them for old values, especially the old values for which he himself has a sentimental regard"

(Russ 2022, 162). This bias confirmation is one of the reasons SF has been seen as an exclusive "boy's genre" from its beginning well into what came to be "The New Wave". Despite all this however, Gernsback did publish works by women even before SF solidified itself and

> "continued this practice in his genre magazines. Moreover, he encouraged authors to draw on literary traditions that had long been popular with women writers, including utopian and Gothic fiction, and women easily adapted his conception of SF as a vehicle for scientific inspiration in order to explore how the genre might also serve as a vehicle for social change." (Yaszek and Sharp 2016, xix)

He understood that society, with all its facets and complexities can become clearer if its many voices shape its image. As a result, here are a few more examples continuing the tradition already briefly presented in the first part of the chapter, this time from the beginning of the Science Fiction era, between the years 1920 and 1960, that show how the genre did in fact benefit once women made their voices heard.

Francis Stevens is a virtual household name, having contributed regularly in this period. *The Heads of Cerberus,* published in 1919 in *The Thrill Book*, a pulp magazine, is her most acclaimed work. Besides this, it is also often seen as the first known science fiction novel to deal with and elaborate on parallel dimensions "in which it is assumed that there are parallel worlds which have developed differently from our own as a result of different choices, circumstances and historical developments" (Sargent 1995, xviii). The work deals with a parallel Philadelphia two hundred years in the future (2118) where the main characters, Robert Drayton, Terence Trenmore, and Viola Trenmore arrive and have to deal with a totalitarian regime. Women also claim the first cyborg in science fiction literature. Catherine Lucille Moore, writing as C.L. Moore, another one of the most prolific early SF writers both in the beginning and its "Golden Age", wrote "No Woman Born" for John Campbell's *Astounding* in 1944.

"Its heroine, a dancer named Deirdre, has her brain transplanted into a metal body after she is nearly killed in a fire. The problems of Deirdre's adjustment to this body are sensitively portrayed; at the story's conclusion, we realize that Deirdre will have many difficulties and that there is a possibility she may become estranged from other humans. But Deirdre is aware of these problems and may, the reader can hope, overcome them; Moore leaves this possibility open." (Sargent 1995, xx)

As such, besides the work dealing with technological advancements that would allow for such a transplant, still impossible today, Moore also deals extensively with human adaptation to that new metal body, preparing

the way for similar discussions in SF works several decades later. A deeper reading also yields another poetic reading of such a story since Deirdre explains why it is important that she keep practicing her art even with such a body since this is the only way in which she can maintain "her contact with humanity through dance" (Sargent 1995, xix). By extrapolation, art then becomes the milieu that keeps humanity afloat in an increasingly mechanized and metallic world. Leslie F. Stone, an author know for "The Conquest of Gola", is the one who wrote the "first woman astronaut, the frist black SF hero, and the first alien civilization to win a war against humans" (Yaszek 2018). Of her work, Lisa Yasek and Patrick Sharp write that:

> "Fans debated the merits of Stone's action- packed but socially provocative stories in the letters pages of the early SF magazines, and at least one such fan — a young man named Isaac Asimov—was so inspired by her 1936 story 'The Human Pets of Mars' that he 'decided to try, for the very first time, [writing] science fiction'." (Yaszek and Sharp 2016, xvii)

Claire Winger Harris, the first woman to contribute a science fiction work in *Amazing Stories* (the first dedicated science fiction magazine) is also among the first authors to "consider the idea of an augmented human" (Ashley 2015) by means of artificial organs. Not yet a complete and complex autonomous cyborg as Moore's Deirdre, but a human and more advanced version of Bellamy's fully mechanical housemaids. She is also the first author to offer a list of sixteen "Possible Science Fiction Plots" (Yaszek 2018) in an article with the same title, published in *Wonder Stories* in 1933, thus offering a framework for both the genre and what was to become literary criticism for the field. Many of these, either already were or became fixtures of SF, still remaining as such today. Criticism at the time was being shaped to great extent by editorials, authors/contributors, and fan feedback.

One can conclude that it is with and through them that the change of pace started and moved from action-adventure stories (space-operas), to a more attentive literature. As they were still very much part of the "pulp" era, however, they were "less interested in sentence-by-sentence literariness than in big *what if* questions and the seemingly boundless imaginative possibilities of futures to come and collaboratively broke all sorts of new generic ground, trying out speculative themes that now seem basic elements in American culture" (Yaszek 2018). This did not prevent them from experimenting however, and as we have seen, a definite legacy can be traced through this undercurrent that is women's contribution to the field of

science fiction. It challenges, creates, experiments, contradicts, sometimes the status quo, other times the senses, but most importantly, it finds questions and possibilities for all readers to ponder and answer themselves, questions which ultimately push the field out of its comfort zone, into the unknown. More, as Pamela Sargent suggests, and much of the cultural import from the United States confirms: "Science fiction, or notions derived from it, can create the relevant myths of our age. Thus the literature shapes attitudes toward future possibilities even in the minds of those who have not read it" (Sargent 1979, xiii). This is particularly relevant for the next period even more so than for the one just discussed.

Towards the Literary Thought Experiments

It is in the 1960s that the personal truly became recognized as political in all walks of American life and the field of science fiction was not exempt from this new development. The genre, already in existence for more than three decades, with a significant volume of constant contributors, had established itself firmly within the American mind. Helmed by visionary editors and pushed ever forward to the outer reaches of human imagination by writers, a lot of whom had been avid fans or contributors to the readers columns, it inevitably became visible in the mainstream and thus taken seriously. If inklings of progress in themes were already seen in the previous generations, this is the time when style became of major interest for readers, editors and writers alike. It is also the time when this literature moved from outer to the inner space of the mind and the psyche, and more authors became concerned not solely with how technology facilitates the ease of human lifestyle, but how it influences one's thought processes. Editor John W. Campbell "insisted that his writers think seriously about the ideas and devices used in their fiction, and that they pay attention to the implications of scientific ideas and advanced technology" (Sargent 1979, xix). However, this period considered by many the greatest in the larger history of science fiction, suffered as "the feature most distinctive of science fiction — the fictional development of possible future worlds using ideas derived from physical, biological, and social sciences — was the one most undeveloped" (Sargent 1979, xxxvii). Of this period editor and writer Judith Merril remarks: "my God, how the stories rolled out! [...] the sad fact is that with all but a few, remembering them is better than rereading them" (Merril 2017, 33), the reason being that they were trying to fit a story in a mold that could not quite hold it. The result was that until the new generation of writers came along to shape the field, it remained "in the

special form in which it had existed for thirty years moribund" (Merril 2017, 36). However, Campbell's great merit, as Merril acknowledges it, is that his

> "*engineering* frame of mind [...] he had a broader concept of the scope of 'science' (technology and engineering); he wanted to explore the effects of the new technological wold on people. Cultural anthropology, social psychology, cybernetics, communications, sociology, education, psychometrics - all these, and a dozen intermediate points, were thrown open for examination" (Merril 2017, 32).

The result was not just a broadening of scope, but of ideas, and for this reason it was not until the 60s that SF became categorized as "sociological" and a "thought experiment". An alchemy of scientific, social, cultural and literary elements had to ensue so that the mold would cast an image as complete and close to the desired one as possible. Women writers, empowered by the civil rights movements and the literary tradition explored above, were able to redefine science alongside science fiction, and freely, but methodically experimented with the social, the cultural, and the political. It is during this time that "there are more female writers entering the field than ever before, though they are still outnumbered by men" (Sargent 1978, xxiii). In Judith Merril's words,

> "[by technology] I do *not* mean machines, and I do *not* mean 'hardware' — artifacts. I mean useful constructs derived from scientific concepts, but not requiring scientific training or understanding to use. Geometry is part of our technology and so is algebra — and so is symbolic logic, and so are the 'tools' of psychometrics — and the less generally tangible tools of psychoanalysis." (Merril 2017, 34)

Technology thus became method and this method could be applied to sciences other than the traditionally "hard" ones. Women writers who were part of this revolution applied such scientific methods of analysis in their works, and turned "soft" sciences, like linguistics, sociology, anthropology, philosophy, in short humanities, into fine-tuned instruments of measuring the development of future cultures while at the same time turning the readers eyes towards their very own cultures and selves. The hard core of science fiction became centered around a soft umbrella of science.

One of the reasons for establishing a literary tradition for an *écriture feminine* in SF prior to this conversation was not only that of establishing a framework but of demonstrating that the beginning of one was already in place from well before the New Wave, before what came to be the

"feminist science fiction" of the last part of the 20th century. Women writers had dealt with such ideas from Victorian times. Perhaps Showalter does not refer to any of the authors presented in the first section when she says that "to many of [Mill's] contemporaries (and to many of ours), it seemed that the nineteenth century was the Age of the Female Novelist" (Showalter 2020, 3), but they were certainly there and part of it. A pattern thus becomes inescapable comparing the impact and presence of what is usually perceived as a minority of writers in the two literary ages, a hundred years apart, one of the "Female Novelist" and one where "the most interesting new writers of science fiction are women" (Sargent 1978, xxiii).

One great, if harrowing example of such a thought experiment is James Tiptree Jr.'s (Alice Sheldon) "The Girl Who Was Plugged In", the tragic account of seventeen year old P. Burke who suffered from pituitary dystrophy. Set in a future where technology advanced so far as to be able to recreate the (inanimate) human body entirely, one would think that cures for such a minor affliction, by comparison, would be found. Yet that was not the case, and the girl suffers from depression derived from the social stigma hormonal imbalances inflict upon her to the point that she tries to end her life and fails. This action is illegal and while under arrest she is presented with the opportunity to control, remotely, one such body, built to perfection, with all the marketable qualities one could ask for and P. Burke did not posses. "Marketable" because she becomes a sales agent for major companies who run a reality show around her new body, in which they add careful product placement around the globe. She is described as ugly, monstrous, a hulk, while the girl she is to be the brain and soul for is minion, beautiful with refined features. Once the remote consciousness connection is established, she lives her life through the body of another, moving it, talking through it, being appreciated and even loved by those around her, yet not being able to feel anything tactile, to taste food to experience anything physical. P. Burke stands for Philadelphia Burke, out of which the creators of the "husk" she mentally inhabits choose Delphi for their creation as if to remove the last shadow of love (*phileo*) the tormented Burke has. This parallel shows the depths of dissociation she goes through while erasing her own previous self and becoming another person. The story is one which in appearance is a cold, account of an uncanny event. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar say that "forty years ago, we'd have considered it a tale of the madwoman in the computer [...] for, deploying a macho style, Tiptree writes this story slangily without any indication of sympathy for the two-in-one heroines" (Gilbert and Gubar 2021, 192). However, on closer inspection, it is a profound analysis of societal pressure

which pushes the ones it considers "others" to extremes. From Delphi's perspective, who towards the end of the story starts showing signs of sentience, it is a critique on the pressure created by the requirement of perfection, where conforming and achieving societal standards forces the individual to shut down/break down. It is also a critique brought to what beauty is in the media, the harsh and uncaring language used can be a veiled commentary to the effects of the male gaze, adding to the grotesque of the projected reality P. Burke lives in without experiencing it fully, although she is in full control of Delphi's actions. She merely perceives it on an intellectual level. Another interpretation may be extrapolated paralleling P. Burke's need to present herself as something other than what she was to society, with the author's pseudonym(s), under which she wrote most of her major stories. In order to afford to write "macho" and present such profoundly feminine experience in an unique way she had to use a male pseudonym.

Another example may be found in Joanna Russ' "When It Changed". It presents a planet, Whileaway, a far terran colony where men died due to an unknown plague that killed only the male of the species. As all colonists sent there were among the elites that Earth had had to offer, the women were scientists, and not only did they survive, but were able to rebuild and thrive. They perpetuate the species through parthenogenesis. Six hundred years after the plague, a few men appear as messengers from Earth. They are imposing, taller then the women living on Whileaway, but that reads as a threatening image rather than one of protection to the women who had never seen men in their lifetimes, on the one hand, and had required no male for their survival. Men thus become the aliens. In terms of action, nothing other than the conversations between the negotiating parties happens, the reader is left questioning possible outcomes. It is an exploration of a complex society which does not idealize either of the sexes, but presents the feminine experience matter-of-factly, albeit disrupted by an unanticipated event that threatens to upset a six hundred-year old ballance. It also provides an answer to what Sargent asserts regarding childbirth and rearing: "adverse reaction to childbirth grows out of the fact that women, now and in the past, have been victimized by it" (Sargent 1979, xi). Such a reaction is certainly prompted by the fact that women were forced into a pattern of existence where they could no longer choose, which is precisely what many women, Russ included, contend with in their works. Sargent further argues that:

"Patriarchal childbirth—childbirth as penance and as medical emergency—and its sequel, institutionalized motherhood, is alienated labor,

exploited labor, keyed to an 'efficiency' and a profit system having little to do with the needs of mothers and children, carried on in physical and mental circumstances over which the woman in labor has little or no control." (*More Women of Wonder* xli)

Without such a system in place to force women into their perceived obligations, victimizing them, Russ is able to explore a world where there is no question of exploitation, mothers choose when, how or even if to procreate. As a result, partners care for their daughters (on Whileaway only daughters are born through parthenogenesis) equally and in agreement. The world is not a "clean, well lighted place" utopia like its literary predecessors. The main character, Janet, mentions that she is the survivor of three duels, all confirmed kills, and she is the chief of police, meaning there is crime for such a position to be needed. She admits that one of the biggest problems they have with advancement is time, therefore not everything runs smoothly and as planned. However, none of the women takes on the role of the man in its traditional form, there is no strong versus weak partner based on sex, in child rearing or in other aspects of life. The strong and weak dichotomy is applied situationally, based on skills or needs, not default physical traits, thus challenging the preordained roles women have to fill within a society.

Finally, Ursula K. LeGuin constructs both *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) and *The Dispossessed* (1974) as sociological and anthropological experiments. In the former, the entire society is made up of sexually neutral individuals, who shift genders during the period of "kemmer". The frequency with which this period occurs and its duration varies from person to person and is also subject to social and environmental conditions. Out of two partners one will become female and the other male, with no preestablished rule as to who will be which, as it is all a momentary and temporary decision. During one *kemmer* one of the partners can be female and during the other the same person can be male, either with the full functionality of that specific sex for the whole duration of that *kemmer*. This allows for the exploration of several things, the first of which is the lack of discrimination based on gender. Due to the fact that they are neutral most of the time and that when they are not they can be either, gender does not play any role in the organizational, cultural or social activities of their planet. Secondly, the default is not male, to which the female body is a variant, therefore these categories are of no relevance in any context, and conversations about binary opposites do not occur. Thirdly, since for the brief period of *kemmer* one can become either sex, they experience life as such, thus when they shift and their partner becomes the other sex, they have an empiric understanding of how that life experience feels. The story is told from the perspective of a terran man, Genly Ai, who was sent to

Winter, or Gethen in the language of the people he encounters, allowing for the readers to follow along in his transformational journey through this alien experience.

The Dispossessed presents two societies, that of planet Annares, which is ruled by complete anarchy at the will of its inhabitants, following a planet-wide revolution, and the equivalent of Earth, Urras where political games between nations and the familiar social structures are dominant. Both societies are presented in depth with their merits and flaws, neither one being idealized. Shevek, the main character, travels from his birthplace on Anarres to Urras to further his scientific research, and his experience serves as a lens through which all structures can be compared. LeGuin does not offer easy answers to age old problems, but rather presents a very complex taxonomy and concludes that "freedom is never very safe" (Le Guin 2002, 317) and yet, it is desirable to corruption: "It was our purpose all along - our Syndicate, this journey of mine - to shake up things, to stir ou, to break some habits, to make people ask question. To behave like Anarchists. So, you see, nobody is quite sure what happens next" (Le Guin 2002, 316). Once more, the reader is invited to question and decide if they would indeed return with Shevek on Anarres, as Anarresti or, alternatively find a different structure altogether.

These breakdowns of convention, specifically made easy by the already unconventional setting of science fiction, can further be seen as the deconstruction of a reality in smaller images, that is the literary texts, which allow for a more thorough analysis. If a reality no longer fits for a vast segment of the population and certain models which have been in place did not work, or rather they only work for a small segment of the general population, feminist science fiction purports new models. By infusing them in their works, these women authors shaped the genre and helped it grow, by showing that it can indeed be different and it can look further than merely mirroring existing systems in futuristic scenarios. In giving them the due credit, one may safely conclude that it is truly these women pioneers who played a key role in proving that the beyond is not only a place in the deep space, and it could be reached by entering the wormhole through a device we have always had at our disposal — literature; it has been perfected across generations by many of their predecessors, as biologist and SF author Vonda McIntyre says: "people like Kate Wilhelm, and Ursula Le Guin, and Joanna Russ, and Andre Norton, and Anne McCaffrey, and Marion Zimmer Bradley kicked down doors in their generation that people in my generation got to walk through" (qtd. Yaszek 2022, xxiii.

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