



SCIENCE FICTION IN THE 1930S

A LITERATURE OF ANGST

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During the few years after the trauma of World War I, in the midst of a financial crisis and in the dread of a Second World War a new kind of literature was coming to fruition in Europe and America in the works of mainstream authors such as E.M. Forster, Joseph Conrad or Ernest Hemingway. Yet, if the nostalgia for a glorious and stable *past* was being contrasted with a more disjointed and subjective *present* in the works of the new Modernist authors [KALAJDZIAN : 10], a more marginal genre was also busy giving a sense to readers of what the *future* might have in store. That genre was Science Fiction.

The start of the popular dissemination of SF can be pin-pointed to April 1926, when the American writer and publisher Hugo Gernsback launched *Amazing Stories*. *Amazing Stories* was the first pulp magazine to be specialized in tales willfully and explicitly mingling Science and Fiction. What Gernsback first called "Scientifiction" in the editorial of the first issue of his magazine, and later referred to as "Science Fiction", was a particular type of literature defined as: "... the Jules Verne, H.G. Wells, and E.A. Poe type of story - a charming romance intermingled with scientific fact and prophetic vision".¹

What Gernsback's magazine was proposing was to go one step further than the avant-garde literature of the day and to offer the new readers of mass publication a quick glimpse into the realm of completely new possibilities offered by the upsetting of the past order. Indeed, Gernsback

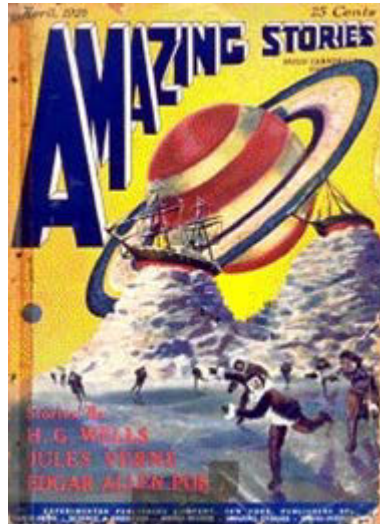
¹ The first occurrence of the term can be traced to the April 1923 issue of Hugo Gernsback's usually technological magazine *Science and Invention*, which was exceptionally dedicated to fiction, or more precisely, to *Scientifiction*. In the editorial of that particular issue, Hugo Gernsback laid the foundations of what -for somewhat obscure copyright reasons or simply because he no longer liked the word- was later to become *Science Fiction*.

was not so much interested in the smoking vestiges of the past or in the repercussions on the present of society's radical change, than in contrasting his unsettled present with an extrapolated future. It was therefore a desire to explore the imminence of the future in a context of immense uncertainty that gave birth to Science Fiction as we know it today; that is, as a recognizable genre of literature, with its own editors, dedicated magazines and commercially sustainable readership.

To get an inkling of the Science Fiction produced in America during those years of cultural upheaval, this article begins with an analysis of a selection of prototypical Science Fiction texts from the SF pulp magazines of the 1930s which marketed to the newly literate population of the US a blind optimism in a future based on a further acceleration of the already sweeping changes in American science and technology (1). Further study of the same corpus then reveals Science Fiction's uncannily ambivalent attitude toward the ongoing social, cultural, economic and geopolitical transformations science and technology were seen to be initiating (2). Finally, a subtext of latent popular fears, always eager to hatch in the midst of troubled times, are also uncovered within the same set of texts (3).

The precise corpus of this enquiry concerns 26 short stories or novelettes published between 1931 and 1938, in the heyday of the first four Science Fiction pulps. These are just a few, selected instances among the thousands of Science Fiction stories published in the US pulps during these years but benefit from having been chosen by Isaac Asimov who brought them together in an autobiographical anthology called *Before the Golden Age*. Of course, all early pulp Science Fiction does not grind down to these few stories; but reading them is already a means of forging an opinion on the meaning of the newly emerging genre².

² Asimov's choice forms, nonetheless, a solid basis for analysis since this biochemist and writer was, until his death in 1992, one of the recognized masters of Science Fiction and one of the early fans who read these early pulps as soon they were published. Asimov's anthology also has the extra advantage of offering contemporary readers the touch and feel of those early pulps by being printed on 912 pages of pulpy paper, complete with rough edges and a garish cover. Moreover, many of the stories published in Asimov's *Before the Golden Age* have also been chosen by other anthologies offering "best of" or "exemplar" selections of Science Fiction stories. This is the case of the recently published *Wesleyan Anthology of Science Fiction* that has also republished Edward Hamilton's "The Man Who Evolved" considering it representative of the "classic super science story" [EVANS : 79]. Applewhite Minyard's *Decades of Science Fiction* (1998) and Hartwell's *Visions of Wonder* (1996) endorsed by the Science Fiction Research Association have also published earlier or later stories by the same authors as those chosen by Asimov,



Covers of the very first issues of *Amazing Stories*, *Science Wonder Stories*, *Astounding Stories of Super Science* and *Thrilling Wonder Stories*. [No rights reserved]

including Jack Williamson, Stanley G. Weinbaum, John W. Campbell, Jr or Asimov himself.

1. *Salvation through Science*

In Asimov's consequential collection, what lay in store for the normal American citizen of the 1930s, rather than dismal job perspectives and an empty bank account, was a brighter future, one of manifold awe-inspiring developments, a world of infinite novelty and boundless adventure. This thrilling "sense of wonder" present in all the early SF pulps has even been used by certain critics to set Science Fiction apart from mainstream literature [CLUTE & NICHOLLS, 1993]. For the readers and authors of US SF pulps³, the general feeling of a deep systemic crisis meant that History was on the move and that anything and everything had to be expected. Novel machines of atomic power would soon be built to solve all the energy and communications problems and unknown space-traveling civilizations would soon be offering all types of alternative lifestyles. The future portrayed in the first Science Fiction pulps thus formed a brighter horizon for humanity as a whole, harboring all sorts of amazing, astounding and thrilling events, and capable of making the worries of the present petty matters inherited from the past.

On close inspection, in 13 of the 26 stories of Asimov's collection, the adventures that carry the hero away from his unpleasant 1930s present depend on the introduction of some kind of novel scientific discovery. These consist, for example, in the discovery of a planet of "reverse matter" [ASIMOV,

³ The four major Science Fiction magazines of the day were *Amazing Stories*, *Wonder Stories*, *Astounding Stories* and *Thrilling Wonder Stories*. First published in April 1926, Hugo Gernsback's *Amazing Stories* was the very first, trailblazing magazine devoted solely to Science Fiction. With a peak circulation of 100,000 issues per week, it was an immediate financial success. Yet in 1929, because of an unfortunate business venture in printing, Gernsback's media company went bankrupt and the founding father of Science Fiction lost control of his magazine to T. O'Connor Sloane. Undeterred, Gernsback created *Science Wonder Stories* in the following weeks thanks to the backlog of freshly produced Science Fiction stories he had been sent while editor of *Amazing Stories*. In January 1930, a third title, published by the competing group *Clayton Magazines*, came into what was proving to be a lucrative niche in the pulp market. This was *Astounding Stories of Super Science*. *Astounding* soon supplanted Gernsback's *Wonder Stories* and O'Connor Sloane's *Amazing Stories* with a circulation of roughly 50,000 by the middle of 1934. By 1936, Hugo Gernsback was again experiencing financial difficulties because of all this fierce competition and sold *Wonder Stories* to Ned Pines of *Beacon Magazines*. *Wonder Stories* was then renamed *Thrilling Wonder Stories*, which, according to Science Fiction historian Mike Ashley [2000 : 51] was briefly, near the end of the 1940s, the best-selling Science Fiction pulp of its day.

Minus Planet : 830]⁴, of *“time faults”* [Sidewise in Time : 537] or of an invented *“Conway Effect”* warping both space and time [Moon Era : 274]. Other scientific breakthroughs come in the form of chemicals such as *“Shrinx”*, a product which, once injected, enables a lab assistant to explore the infinitely vast world of the infinitesimally small [He Who Shrank : 679] or a *“preservative gas”* capable of embalming a hero from Ancient Greece all the way through the bleak 1930s and into the 10th millennium [Past, Present, Future : 848]. It is, however, mostly newly developed machines such as the *“Electronic Vibration Adjuster”* [Submicroscopic : 61] or a ship capable of reaching *“a maximum velocity of thousands of light-years, per second”* [Colossus : 427] which, with the flick of a switch, lead readers to *“declutch”* [CORDESSE : 113] from their ordinary referential world and to escape into the incommensurable world of SF⁵. Perhaps the best example in such matters is *“The World of the Red Sun”* [181], by the then young Clifford D. Simak, the very opening lines of which read:

‘Ready, Bill? asked Horl Swanson. Bill Kressman nodded.

‘Then kiss 1935 good-bye!’ cried the giant Swede, and swung over the lever.

In the other half of the stories of the corpus, it is not so much a new technology than the sudden appearance of alien creatures—usually from within our solar system—that was used to marvellously transform the readers’ everyday environment of money shortage and unimaginative bosses. This is the case, for example, in *“Old Faithful”* where a Martian announces thanks to *“powerful sending equipment”* [549] his visit to our planet in a *“space car”* [571]. Exactly like his human counterparts, he too looks *“forward to the trials and dangers that were certain to come soon and to the triumphs that might come with them”* [557]⁶. Likewise, in *“The Jameson Satellite”*, aliens discover Earth and befriend the terminally-ill Professor Jameson because *“the most popular pastime of the machine men of Zor was the exploration of the Universe. This afforded them a never ending source of interest in*

⁴ All page numbers following quotations in italics or story titles refer to ASIMOV unless specified otherwise.

⁵ The four other stories of Asimov’s collection depending on marvellous scientific developments—but that have not been mentioned so far—are: *“The Jameson Satellite”*, *“The Man Who Awoke”*, *“Submicroscopic”* and *“The Men and the Mirror”*.

⁶ The stories more particularly concentrating on alien contacts, but which may also incorporate certain marvellous scientific developments are: *Old Faithful*, *The Brain Stealers of Mars*, *Other Eyes Watching*, *The Accursed Galaxy*, *Devolution*, *Proxima Centauri*, *Awlo of Ulm*, *Tetrahedra of Space*, *The Human Pets of Mars*, *Tumithak of the Corridors*, *Tumithak in Shawm*, *The Parasite Planet*, and finally, *The Moon Era*.

the discovery of the variegated inhabitants and conditions of the various planets on which they came to rest”[44].

That a fundamentally new science or an unknown civilization should suddenly spring from nowhere may sound somewhat naive today and not scientific at all. Yet context is a fundamental aspect here for, as Stephen Kern, has written:

From around 1880 to the outbreak of World War I a series of sweeping changes in technology and culture created distinctive new modes of thinking about and experiencing time and space [...]. The result was a transformation.” [KERN : 1]

Indeed, the scientific breakthroughs and ongoing technological applications of people such as Edison (1847-1931), Tesla (1856-1943), Marconi (1874-1937), Ford (1863-1947) or Einstein (1879-1955) were greatly unsettling the established order and making anything apparently incredible just as likely as anything else. In much the same way, the many new and revolutionary communication technologies such as radio, the telephone, the automobile, the trans-continental locomotive or the intercontinental steamer were also deeply affecting people's lives and becoming everyday objects. From airplanes to bicycles, all kinds of new means of communication were shrinking time and distance all over the world. In such a context, the prospect of an exotic encounter with a fundamentally different but intelligent being could seem not only possible but also even likely.

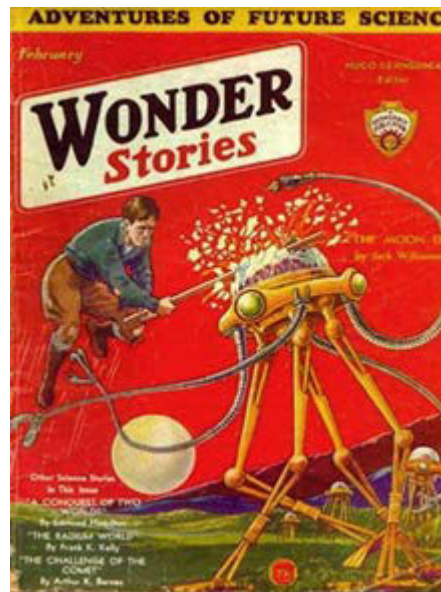
Scientific breakthrough stories or alien contact stories thus became, at least for those who wrote or read these pulps, logical extrapolations from what was already in gestation in the real world of the 1930s and thus a happy source of solace for those first readers, if not a truly realistic means of escape from the gloom of the Great Depression.

2. Fear in times of radical change

The thrill and hope of a better and brighter future, radically different and deeply transforming the reader's referential world of the 1930s, however, also carried the uncanny feeling of subtle and hidden possible dangers. In the very texts telling the tale of fearless heroes boldly exploring unknown territories are sentences such as this one in “Old Faithful”: “*They were uncertain whether to be fearful of the unknown thing whose approach they sensed, or to be exultant*” [565]. Another occurrence, this time taken from “Tetrahedra Of Space” [though there are many such in just about every story] is: “*faced by the stark blankness of the utterly unknown ... they began to be afraid*” [170]. In “The Accursed Galaxy”, Edmond Hamilton even writes: “*He stopped*

suddenly and abruptly. Panic fell on his face, blind terror of the unknown" [662]. This apparently innate fear towards anything new, unexplored, or contrary to accepted norms and habits is also at the heart of early Science Fiction. Indeed, for the same authors, readers and editors what also mattered were the immediate consequences of the scientific breakthroughs or the alien contacts on the American way of life.

Again two distinct categories can be made to appear within the same corpus of texts. The first is a series of stories centered on aliens exploring Earth. The second is a different set of stories where it is the earthlings who explore alien territories. The covers of two Science Fiction magazines of the thirties illustrating two stories from Asimov's compilation of texts can be used to conveniently represent this divide: Murray Leinster's "Proxima Centauri" illustrating the cover of *Astounding Stories* of March 1935 and "The Moon Era" on the cover of the February 1932 issue of *Wonder Stories*.



"Proxima Centauri" illustrating the cover of *Astounding Stories*, March 1935 and "The Moon Era" on the cover of the February 1932 issue of *Wonder Stories*. [No rights reserved]

“Proxima Centauri”, on the one hand, is the tale of a race of intelligent, space traveling plants from a nearby solar system that lust after animal food. A group of these flesh-eating and mobile creatures “*composed of cellulose fibres*” [624] chance upon a group of human explorers lost in interstellar space. To illustrate the predicament the human space travelers are in, a woman in distress is held captive by these technologically-advanced monsters eager to conquer Earth. On the other hand, the story by Jack Williamson illustrated on the cover of the February 1932 issue of *Wonder Stories* is “The Moon Era”. It is about a young American, who, thanks to “*a novel invention*” [266] discovers and finally vanquishes the inhuman “*travesties of life ... Huge, black and cold*” [303] he discovers on the Moon.

The advantage of this new division—between stories where Earth is at risk of being enslaved by extraterrestrials and stories where alien lands are conquered by humans—is not that it creates two extra subcategories within SF but that, on the contrary, it reveals the way the crises brought about by Science and Technology were handled, in fact, in a very singular way. As Asimov's selection of the pulp Science Fiction stories of the 1930s goes to show, any technologically backward civilization, human *or* alien, was necessarily doomed to be either enslaved, eaten or brutally destroyed by any technologically superior civilization. In Frank Paul's illustration of “Proxima Centauri”, it is a woman (represented as mankind's weak spot) who is portrayed as being at risk. In “The Moon Era”, the leaps and bounds of just one specimen of 1930s humanity is shown to be capable of exterminating the hostile, semi-mechanical inhabitants of the moon.

It therefore appears, that the fantastic possibilities Science and Technology were offering America were setting off the alarm bells of a particular type of fear: that of the technological dream of progress backfiring, that of America becoming the victim of a technological application of Universal Science first harnessed by its enemies. This can be illustrated by the very titles of several of the stories chosen by Asimov as representative of the very early years of Science Fiction. “The Human Pets of Mars”, “The Brain Stealers of Mars”, “Other Eyes Watching”, all announce a clearly paranoid fear of White America being overrun by technologically superior Aliens⁷.

Further markers of the ambivalent feelings towards radical change, as expressed in the early Science Fiction magazines, are the archetypical characters of most Science Fiction stories. The inventor of all the fantastically

⁷ *Other Eyes Watching* was written by John Wood Campbell, Jr. who, after Hugo Gernsback, was to become the most influential figure in American Science Fiction, from late 1937 until his death in 1971, as the editor of *Astounding Science Fiction*.

new apparatuses is always initially portrayed as an eccentric, a man of immense intelligence, way ahead of his time. Such geniuses, however, have their alter-egos in the shape of the Mad Professor. These are the Dr Moreaus or Frankensteins working on unspeakable experiments in secret laboratories, creating humanoid monsters, or producing horrific mind-and-body-altering chemicals for the sole purpose of flattering their egos and/or of achieving world domination. For example, in "The Man Who Evolved", Dr Pollard is the modest inventor of a fabulous "*evolution accelerator*" [27]. Initially, he is presented by the narrator as a friend and fellow graduate of New York Technical College, having acquired master's and doctor's degrees before working in Vienna for a time. He is said to be a "*lanky figure with a slow smile and thoughtful eyes*" [24]. Later, however, when he has evolved into a superior form of human being, the once homely figure of Dr Pollard menaces his friends saying:

I could direct you without a word to kill yourself and you'd do so in an instant! What chance has your puny will and brain against mine? And what chance will all the force of men have against me when a glance from me will make them puppets of my will? [33]

Similarly, in "Sidewise in Time", Professor Minott is also initially described as a quite harmless "*instructor in Mathematics on the faculty of Robinson College in Fredericksburg, Virginia*" [497]. Though he does have "*a particularly fierce passion for Maida Haynes, daughter of the Professor of Romance languages*", he is said to have "*practically no chances to win even her attention over the competition of most of the student body*" [497]. Once lost on a parallel world with Maida Haynes, however, Professor Minott is transformed and his powers of calculus bring him to say: *We shall live in that world and use our knowledge*. Maida Haynes replies: *But again-what for?—To conquer it!* [512] says the now megalomaniac Mad Professor ready to use and misuse his intellectual advantage. A third but by no means the last possible example would be in "The World of the Red Sun", where it is "*a great scientist*" who later becomes "*an abomination*" [199].

The other well-known archetype of Science Fiction is the fearless adventurer, off on an extraordinary voyage. He is the "*young man with strength, endurance, and courage*" [The Moon Era : 265], the time-adventurer for whom "*the call [of science] is stronger than the ties of blood*" [The Man Who Awoke : 321], the brave pilots haunted by

Alexander, wishing for more worlds to conquer; Marco Polo, wending his way across lands of legend; Columbus, sailing upon unknown waters; Peary, assaulting the roof of the world; Lindbergh, winging through the skies—the ghosts of all the master explorers and travelers of the past.

He has *“teethed upon a Stillson wrench”* [The Human Pets of Mars : 732] and is quick to get to grips with even alien applications of Science (*“He was sufficient of a physicist and engineer to realize that they were far in advance of the year 1937”* [Past, Present, Future : 860]). These heroes are cultural icons of propaganda embodying the greatness and triumph of the American nation. They are integral to the American imagination as to appear as true to life as the brave cowboy who once won the West (*“Here was a man who could fight as at a frolic—and judge wisely—a healthy mind in a healthy body”* [Past, Present, Future : 861]).

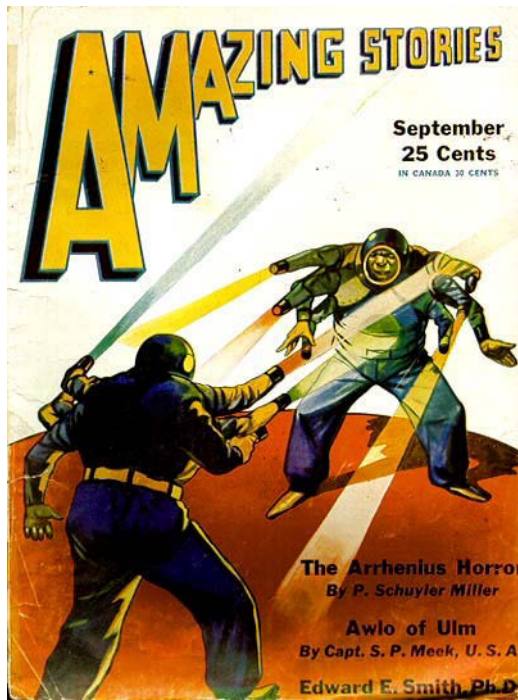
Yet, like the scientific genius, this archetype too has a mirror image in another equally common character: that of the invader from Mars⁸, the alien who, callously superior, wreaks havoc with various super-scientific death rays and flying saucers. These super villains often echo the superheroes they resemble in an important way: pioneering humans, like colonizing aliens were both portrayed as intent on world domination and ready to crush inferior life forms like children crush ants.

3. Scapegoats and stereotypes in times of anxiety

Again a word on the context in which these stories were written appears necessary at this point. The Soviet Union, the Wall Street Crash of 1929, the advent of Fascism in Italy and Nazism in Germany, Civil War in Spain are key factors to understanding the preoccupations of all the Western literatures of the 1930s. Between the two World Wars, while the equilibrium of the vast colonial empires which spanned the Earth was being questioned, it seems that the best way to express what was presented as the apparently obvious universal constant of the survival of the technologically fittest was to draw a parallel with the commonly accepted sexist and racist stereotypes of the day. The red-skinned South American civilization of *“Tetrahedra of Space”*, for example, is described as practically deserving annihilation by the higher geometrical life forms represented by the Tetrahedra. According to the text, South American Indians are superstitious savages and clearly subhuman. In *“Submicroscopic”*, one particularly ugly, barbarous and cannibalistic people with practically no technological knowledge at all is described as having black skin. In *“Awlo of Ulm”*, the sequel to *“Submicroscopic”*, illustrated here on the cover of the September 1931 issue

⁸ It is interesting to note what Roland Barthes has already pointed out in his chapter on *“Martians”* in *Mythologies* [BARTHES : 42-44]: that the flying saucer came from the Soviet unknown, of that world as mysterious to the western world as...another planet.

of *Amazing Stories*, a man and an alien are seen embattled in alien space suits equipped with mortal ray guns.



"Awlo of Ulm" illustrating the cover of *Amazing Stories*, September 1931. [No rights reserved]

The inventors of these battle suits are the men of Kau, scientifically advanced aliens whose skins are said to be of "a disgusting saffron yellow and their eyes [...] set obliquely in their heads" [91].

Another simplification, brutally illustrating the idea that any technologically inferior party will necessarily be overrun by a more technologically advanced civilization, was to liken aliens to spiders or reptiles. The savage black, the cruel oriental or the freakish bug-eyed monster were drummed into the minds of readers to such a point that the hero, who in the end always saved the day, was always male, white, fair-haired, blue-eyed and well-proportioned as he is portrayed here in the novelette "He Who Shrank"⁹.

⁹ The cultural stereotypes that were taken for granted in this type of adventure fiction have, with time, been largely phased out of SF and should not be used to specify the genre, since such stereotypes can also be traced in the Westerns, Detective stories, Love Stories and other types of fiction present in the Pulp of the day.



The cover of *Amazing Stories*, August 1936 illustrating Henry Hasse's novelette "He Who Shrank". [No rights reserved]

Judging by the contents of a small selection of the very first Science Fiction stories published in the US pulps, it therefore seems that the 1930s, in America, was a time of immense technological but also economic and social change raising the question: "What's next?"; and that the ambivalence of the answer—namely that science meant power over all—let loose, somewhat paradoxically, representations from the past. Indeed, America's recent history showed that the civilization which best survived was the most technologically advanced. Born from an invasion by aliens with a dominating culture and a superior technology—especially in the area of weaponry—, white America had submitted the less technologically advanced indigenous peoples of the continent.

Seen through the lens of a small but reasonably representative selection of the pulp Science Fiction literature of the thirties, it seems that what terrified American SF readers most in the 1930s was that the same thing could happen to them, that the empowering technological dream they had lived so far could revive the worst nightmares of their enemies' past and could conceivably bring about their own future downfall. Faced with such a

menace, the usual scapegoats and stereotypes were brandished to appease the fears of readers caught in times of general anxiety.

Conclusion: Early SF a literature of Hope, Fear or Anxiety?

During the 1930s, while modern technology was changing the face of the world and an older rural order was being definitively ousted, Science Fiction, as a genre, was formalizing the hopes and fears born from the Second Industrial Revolution. The preoccupations of America in such troubled times, as they were conveyed in the US SF pulp magazines of the day, thus open up new insights into the mindscapes of popular readers, writers and publishers during a critical period in Western History and in that of Literature.

Through this particular lens, the 1930s appears as a period of hope and expectation in technology as a means of solving America's ongoing problems. By placing at the heart of every narrative a radical transformation of the hero's everyday world, SF was domesticating radical change and presenting historical moments of crisis as great opportunities for mankind. Such solace helped readers pull through the new century's lot of wars, brutal climatic events and economic uncertainty.

But Science Fiction was not just a blindly hopeful form of literature, since it simultaneously expressed the fear of technology's formidable ability to suddenly reshuffle power and to possibly unsettle America's position as the most powerful nation in the world. It therefore combined the hopes of overcoming the complex situation America was in with the everyday uncertainty of life in the 1930s.

In the light of such angst, early SF readers, writers and publishers—like all too many people in times of crisis—clung to their most conservative values, those which ensured that the white, phallographic and colonialist values that had built Modern America should never wholly unsettle the lives of those in power and would never be wholly unsettled by any enemy from outside.

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