

A Defense of the Science Fiction Literary Genre:
The Interplay between Science Fiction and American Society during the Cold War

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Abstract

Science fiction (sci-fi) has existed for centuries, if not millennia, yet many people still do not view it as a respectable literary genre. In fact, many intellectuals claim that sci-fi does not count as true literature since it supposedly promotes mere adolescent escapism. However, nothing could be further from the truth. Sci-fi is a deep, nuanced genre that allows people to more fully engage with the world around them and to wrestle with their own hopes, fears, and desires. This is evident in the content of American sci-fi novels that came out of the Cold War era (1947-1991). During this period, sci-fi was especially intertwined with the real world of politics, technology, and human emotions. Many novels from this time reflect real fears that people in the United States had about the dangers of communism and the threat of nuclear destruction. Some of these sci-fi stories offered people hope for a brighter future in which communism was defeated while others provided a canvas for imagining how the Cold War could play out. In particular, the sci-fi novels *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, *Cat's Cradle*, and *Earth Abides* accomplished a two-fold purpose: they both dealt with real-world issues from the Cold War era, and they spoke to broader questions about the nature of human identity and experience. In turn, Cold War-era sci-fi had very real, tangible effects on human society, particularly by influencing American war policy and military technology. Overall, Cold War-era America embodied a mutual relationship of influence between sci-fi literature and culture, revealing the significance of sci-fi as a tool for speculation and for probing questions about human identity and behavior. This significance continues to hold weight in the world today and points to the legitimacy of sci-fi as a literary genre.

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Science fiction (sci-fi) is an immensely popular form of literature in today's world; in fact, as of 2017, it was tied with fantasy as the most lucrative book genre (Turner-Francis). However, despite its appeal to audiences of all ages, sci-fi is often treated as an inferior literary genre, one that many intellectuals and scholars scoff at as nothing more than whimsical, childish, escapist stories that are fundamentally disconnected from the real world. For instance, one college professor reportedly stated, "Science fiction is not a true literature, because it does not explore what it means to be human" (qtd. in Tracy). Similarly, a renowned novelist named Vladimir Nabokov once told a reporter, "I loathe science fiction with its gals and goons, suspense and suspensories" (qtd. in Ditung). In short, although sci-fi is widely loved, many critics deem it nothing more than nonsense or intellectual trash. For numerous readers, sci-fi may be viewed as a guilty pleasure—it is fun and enjoyable to read, yet it apparently lacks meaning and relevance to people's everyday lives.

However, beneath the façade of spaceships and killer robots, sci-fi probes far deeper into the realm of human nature and real-world issues than many critics will acknowledge. Certainly, plenty of sci-fi novels are poorly written, yet the same is true of all types of literature—there are both masterpieces and low-quality novels in every genre. Ultimately, it is sci-fi, perhaps more than any other literary genre, that explicitly seeks to explore and confront real-world issues in order to attack particular ideologies, promote certain patterns of behavior, and envision what the future has in store for humanity. At its core, sci-fi is not nonsense or escapism; it can be a profound, nuanced form of literature that provides a critical outlet for human beings to express

their deepest hopes and fears and to influence other people to feel, think, and act in certain ways. This is especially evident in the way that sci-fi intertwined with the real world in the United States during the Cold War (1947-1991). Much of the sci-fi literature that came out of this period reflected societal fears about nuclear warfare and the dangers of communism. Furthermore, some of these American sci-fi works sought to reassure people that victory over the Soviet Union could be achieved while other novels were written to envision different ways that the Cold War could play out. Not only did sci-fi written during the Cold War reflect real-world events that were happening at the time—Cold War-era sci-fi also helped shape the technological developments of its time and left an indelible mark on history. Ultimately, Cold War-era sci-fi had a very real, tangible effect on society in the way that it influenced American military technologies and strategies for winning the war, including (most notably) Ronald Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative (Busch 463). Thus, a reciprocal relationship of influence existed between sci-fi and American society during the Cold War, revealing the ability of sci-fi to both reflect and affect the real world. In this sense, sci-fi is very much a legitimate form of literature, for, as was evident during the Cold War, it interacts with the real world of human affairs, both by reflecting it and by shaping it.

The Relationship between Literature and Human Society

The ability of literature to interact with human society has been recognized by many researchers and scholars. Indeed, the twin acts of reading and writing fiction are fundamentally social activities that cannot be fully separated from the realm of human ideas and behaviors (Parker). In fact, researchers in a 2018 study found that reading fiction can help improve “people's capacity to understand and mentally react to other individuals and social situations”

(Parker). Similarly, one psychologist suggests that when people read literature, “the struggles and concerns, the pleasures and hopes, the nuances and social dynamics that unfold for the characters in the story can offer valuable insights on humanity and life” (Parker). Thus, literature does not stand alone as an isolated entity. While it often involves individual imagination and the creative ability to make up people and places that do not exist, the real power of literature lies in its ability to help people understand themselves, develop empathy for others, and become more active members of the world around them. Authors draw on universal real-world phenomena and their own cultural contexts to develop stories that temporarily take people out of this world in order to ground them more firmly in it. In this sense, “reading is not exhausted merely by decoding the written word or written language, but rather anticipated by and extending into knowledge of the world” (Freire and Slover 5). If reality and the language of literature are so intricately intertwined, then it stands to reason that the real world can influence the content of literature, and stories can in turn have an impact on the real world.

The relationship between literature and society has long been the subject of study and debate, and literary theorists have identified three main ways of understanding how stories interact with the real world of human affairs. First, literature has been studied as a reflection of society and human culture (Albrecht 427). This view of storytelling says that the content of a work of literature draws on that work’s historical and cultural context (428). According to this literary theory, literature reflects various aspects of society, such as economics, family structures, morals, social classes, political events, and wars (426). Stories cannot be interpreted solely on their own terms; one must look at outside factors in order to fully understand and appreciate what a particular work of literature is saying (430). In essence, “the historical aspect of literature,

minor or unimportant though it may be for aesthetic purpose, cannot be totally ignored” (Duhan 92-3). Thus, from this point of view, one might say that the real world has a very tangible effect on the creation and interpretation of literature.

While this first main approach to literature analyzes its potential to be influenced by society, other literary theorists believe that stories are capable of shaping the world around them. For instance, some scholars interpret literature as a means of strengthening social solidarity and of preserving traditional beliefs, attitudes, and values among humans (Albrecht 431). Similarly, another approach views stories as capable of altering and shaping society by influencing people to think, believe, and act in ways that go against the status quo (434). These latter two views of literature—as a means of either reinforcing or undermining traditional ideologies and behaviors—ultimately say the same thing: that literature can influence the real world by impacting what people think and do. Significantly, this approach does not contradict the aforementioned belief that society shapes the content of literature. Ultimately, “language and reality are dynamically intertwined” (Freire and Slover 5). Indeed, the two main ideas presented here—that literature either reflects or influences human culture—can occur simultaneously, meaning a reciprocal relationship of influence exists between literature and society (Albrecht 435).

If much of literature’s value comes from its ability to interact with human society and to wrestle with questions about human affairs—as many people, including professors and literary scholars, claim—then one critical way to determine a genre’s value as “true literature” is to evaluate how closely it intertwines with human society, both in the context of individual cultures and in terms of universal human identity. Thus, in the debate over whether sci-fi can be

considered a valuable literary genre, it is important to test claims such as that made by the aforementioned college professor: “Science fiction is not a true literature, because it does not explore what it means to be human” (qtd. in Tracy). Essentially, this professor has made a value claim that good, proper literature must wrestle with some aspect of humanity’s identity, experience, and place in the world. Using this point of view, sci-fi must in some way interact with the real world in order to be considered a valid literary genre. Notably, history reveals many times and ways that sci-fi novels have both drawn on and influenced society. One relatively small segment of history alone—the Cold War (1947-1991)—affords numerous examples of works of sci-fi that grappled with very real, relevant human emotions and problems and that, in turn, ultimately influenced the real world of human affairs.

Recognition of the Power of Literature during the Cold War

The Cold War (1947-1991) was not fought through force; rather, it was an ideological conflict, one that was primarily waged on political, cultural, and propaganda fronts (Romeo). As a result, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) recognized literature as an important tool that could help the United States win this war against the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). In fact, at one point during the Cold War, the CIA’s chief of covert action famously stated, “Books differ from all other propaganda media primarily because one single book can significantly change the reader’s attitude and action to an extent unmatched by the impact of any other single medium” (Romeo). Additionally, he also called books “the most important weapon of strategic propaganda” (Romeo). Thus, even an agency as important as the CIA recognized the power of literature to fundamentally alter the way people think, believe, and approach various issues. In line with this high view of literature, the CIA intentionally facilitated the spread of

Boris Pasternak's novel *Doctor Zhivago*, a book that represents one of the earliest Cold War-era efforts to directly impact the real world through literature (Romeo).

Written by a Soviet citizen, *Doctor Zhivago* (1957) was rejected for publication in the USSR since authorities viewed it as a dangerous piece of anti-Soviet/anti-communism rhetoric (Romeo). The author, Boris Pasternak, managed to smuggle copies of the manuscript to Italy for publication, and the CIA in the United States subsequently took great interest in this book, actively seeking to secretly circulate it within the USSR (Romeo). Ultimately, the CIA's aim was "to get this [book] into the hands of Soviet citizens and hope that each Soviet citizen who got the book would pass it to a friend, and that person would pass it to another, so that the book would circulate widely" (*PBS NewsHour*). The CIA wanted to turn Soviet citizens against the Communist regime under which they lived and which the United States sought to undermine (Romeo). Thus, through the power of the CIA, the United States "sought to engineer the arts and the political unconscious, and in so doing provide a positive image of liberal, democratic polity" (Gearon and Wynne-Davies 755). The CIA's desire to wage ideological warfare through the spread of literature demonstrates recognition of the immense power of literature to shape and interact with human society.

Communism and Nuclear War: Cold War Fears in America

Many American sci-fi novels that came out of the Cold War period were written in a way that reflected the myriad of fears and ideologies that were prevalent in American society at this time. During the Cold War, two of the biggest issues that came to the forefront of American thought were (1) fear of the dangers of communism and (2) anxiety that the tensions of the Cold War would escalate into all-out nuclear war that could spell the end of human civilization and

existence. Although the Allies had defeated Nazism in World War II, many people in the West, particularly in the United States, still had “anxieties regarding the postwar world order” (Sharp 85), particularly as the horrors of the Communist order in the USSR came to light. Thus, one of the central Cold War issues that drove the American people’s emotions was that of communism.

In general, people throughout the United States feared communism and wanted to preserve and advance the free, democratic spirit that defined America (Romero 291). Not everyone was so strongly opposed to communism, and many Americans believed that anticommunist measures had grown to unhealthy levels that actually threatened the peace, security, and privacy of United States citizens (293). However, although anticommunism was not necessarily a unified sentiment across the United States, it was the “lowest common denominator” (291), providing most Americans with a “shared language” (291) that would unite citizens in the midst of such a fraught, perilous time. Throughout the United States, people who despised communism “shared a powerful narrative of their epoch as a fundamental conflict between ‘freedom’ and ‘totalitarianism’” (291). People had different reasons for hating communism; however, despite their differences, their overarching preference for the American political and economic system led to a societal prejudice against the ideology of communism (295).

Anticommunism came to dominate national American political and social life, with many events taking place that revealed how much anticommunism permeated society in the United States. Most prominently, paranoia about communism led to what became known as the “Red Scare” or “McCarthyism” (“Anti-Communism”). Although fewer than fifty thousand Americans were members of the Communist Party as of 1950 (“Anti-Communism”), people in the United

States were so anxious and paranoid about the possibility of internal communist subversion that they took to extreme measures to rid the nation of this supposed threat. For instance, “government loyalty boards investigated millions of federal employees, asking what books and magazines they read, what unions and civic organizations they belonged to, and whether they went to church” (“Anti-Communism”). Furthermore, many people in Hollywood, including actors, directors, and screenwriters, were blacklisted from working if there was even the slightest suspicion that they aligned with Communist views (“Anti-Communism”). Similarly, employees across numerous industries lost their jobs for the same reason (“Anti-Communism”). Certain classic books and essays that were considered too leftist were banned from libraries across the country, including *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Robin Hood*, and *Civil Disobedience* (“Anti-Communism”).

Additionally, in places such as Chicago, local governments created commissions that were designed to investigate the political activities of professors at various universities (“Cold War and Anti-Communism”). Other government-sponsored committees were formed to uncover the political leanings of potential schoolteachers and to remove so-called “liberal” texts from public schools (“Cold War and Anti-Communism”). While the Red Scare certainly manifested itself in political activities, it also affected the cultural and social fabric of the United States. For instance, in publications such as *Reader’s Digest*, the USSR and communism alike were portrayed as evil, pernicious entities that sought to end peace and liberty throughout the world (Sharp 84). Indeed, *Reader’s Digest* “portrayed Soviet citizens as slaves whose plight had previously been hidden from view by Soviet leaders pulling down the Iron Curtain to hide their crimes” (85). Ultimately, this unbridled fear of Communists led many people to criticize the

excesses of McCarthyism and the increased social and political conformity it brought to the United States (Gerstle 239).

Another issue that rose to prominence and affected all aspects of American life during the Cold War was the widespread fear that this tense, ideological conflict would culminate in a devastating nuclear war that could destroy humanity—or at the very least, cause irreversible damage to the world and human civilization (Buck). Indeed, fear of nuclear annihilation was something that people lived with every day in the Cold War era. Numerous individuals who grew up in the midst of the Cold War have since recounted how drastically the threat of nuclear attack impacted their childhoods (Buck). Writer David Ropeik, who vividly remembers the terror and anxiety of living through the Cuban Missile Crisis, remarked, “I remember going to bed one night when I was 11, seriously afraid I would not be alive in the morning” (qtd. in Buck). Furthermore, many children wrote letters to the various American presidents who served at this period, begging them not to unleash deadly nuclear weapons (Buck).

Unlike at the beginning of the 1900s, when people were excited about radiation and the potential for science to dramatically alter war technology, now almost everyone was terrified at the destruction that could be wreaked by bombs (Schatz and Fiske 3). Americans had witnessed the horrible damage caused by dropping bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the end of World War II, causing them to fully realize just how deadly nuclear technology could be (5). Every day, people lived in constant fear for their lives and for the lives of their loved ones. No one escaped the fear of nuclear war, even the very young. One child wrote to President John F. Kennedy in the early 1960s to ask, “What will be left of this wonderful world in ten years if someone presses the button?” (qtd. in Buck). Expectations that nuclear war would occur continued to rise

throughout the 1970s and 1980s (Schatz and Fiske 2). By 1981, nearly 50 percent of American poll respondents believed it likely that “the United States would become involved in a nuclear war” (2). Overall, both communism and the threat of nuclear war were the leading issues of the day in the United States during the Cold War.

Sci-Fi Novels: Reflecting Cold War-Era Fears in the United States

The fears and issues that plagued American citizens were all very real, pressing problems that found their way into the literature of the day, including into the literary genre of sci-fi. Several sci-fi novels that came out of this period clearly illustrate themes that were relevant to Cold War-era America, revealing the ability of sci-fi to wrestle with real-world problems and questions about human identity and experience. Ultimately, the existence of these novels affirms sci-fi as a valuable, powerful, and true form of literature that is far more important than a cursory glance at the genre would reveal. Sci-fi is deep and nuanced, and the superficial appearance of aliens, robots, and spaceships in such works belie far subtler yet more impactful messages that speak directly into the heart of who humans are.

Significantly, many of the sci-fi novels that were written during the Cold War do not express identical viewpoints, even when addressing the same topic. Some of the novels condemn communism while others critique the extremist measures taken by anticommunists during the Red Scare. Certain works presented a pessimistic view of the future while lamenting the dangers of nuclear weapons, and other novels centered on providing people with hope and optimism in the midst of the terror and anxiety that plagued American society during the war. Despite their varying approaches, all of these works of sci-fi possess one thing in common: they all grapple with real-world issues that real people dealt with at a particular point in history. In particular, the

sci-fi novels *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, *Cat's Cradle*, and *Earth Abides* all explore real problems that stemmed from the Cold War in the United States. In addition, these novels go further to grapple with questions about the universal human experience. By writing these works of literature, sci-fi authors were able to wrestle with their own hopes and fears (as well as those of the people around them), speculate about what the future had in store for humanity, and either propose or discourage certain ideologies and courses of action.

Invasion of the Body Snatchers

Written by Jack Finney, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1955) grapples with one of the main sentiments that gripped American society during the Cold War period: the fear of communism. Although this work is similar to many other works in that it was influenced by an anti-communist attitude, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* is unique in that it portrays a more optimistic view of the future. Indeed, Finney's work offers hope that people could defeat the evil they feared (communism). Notably, "the context of the Fifties has so many striking parallels in *Body Snatchers* that the historian of the period would be remiss in not pointing them out" (LeGacy 288). Thus, this novel serves as both a warning and an encouragement. It expresses societal fears of its time while simultaneously comforting people by showing them that victory is possible.

Invasion of the Body Snatchers communicates its poignant message by equating communism to one of the most well-known sci-fi tropes: a malicious alien invasion. The entire work is permeated with a sense of horror and terrifying danger as the characters are threatened by alien life forms that slowly yet surely begin to take over the world (Finney 174). Notably, within the sci-fi genre, aliens are often depicted as "Darwinian competitors with mankind"

(“Alien Encounters”) and as “deadly enemies” (Jones 168) that pose a grave threat to humanity. Such is the depiction of aliens within Finney’s renowned work. In *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, the alien “pods” that come to Earth from outer space are portrayed as parasites. In an effort to survive, these pods float down to Earth, hatch, and proceed to form exact replicas of every living person (Finney 167). Indeed, scores of human beings are “precisely duplicated, atom for atom, molecule for molecule, cell for cell” (167) by these aliens, and the original bodies—in other words, humans themselves—dissipate into “nothing, a pile of gray fluff” (167). Thus, the aliens survive by turning themselves into perfect physical duplicates of human beings, complete with all of the same knowledge and memories that the original humans possessed (168). In the process, the human victims completely disappear, forever replaced by alien life forms that look exactly like them. Essentially, then, Finney portrays aliens as malevolent beings, parasites that prey on human beings and kill them in order to preserve the alien race. Through depicting aliens in such a way, Finney sets the stage for a story that embodies a common trend in Cold War-era America: the tendency to fear communism and to see it as a terrible threat to mankind.

Notably, the alien pods in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* possess many characteristics that Americans tended to associate with communism during the Cold War. Indeed, “most critics have interpreted *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* as a reflection of the political and social anxieties of 1950s America” (Sanders 55). At many points throughout the novel, Finney describes the alien pods in a way that seems to reflect the fears that many people in the United States had about communism. For instance, the character Wilma describes one of the aliens in the following manner: “I have the feeling, the absolutely certain *knowledge* that he’s talking by rote. That the facts of Uncle Ira’s memories are all in his mind in every last detail, ready to

recall. But the emotions are not. There is no emotion—none—only the pretense of it” (Finney 15). Later in the novel, the character Jack notes that the aliens seem “unformed” (31); they possess all of the outward, physical features of a human being, yet these features somehow lack individuality and unique details (30). As Jack puts it, “It’s all there, all right, but the details that give it character aren’t” (30). Furthermore, Finney states that the aliens speak without emotion; indeed, one of them “laughed falsely, in a hideous burlesque of embarrassment” (127). In all of these descriptions, the novel paints of a portrait of beings who lack individuality. They are blank and emotionless, conforming to a standard that reduces every life form to a bland sameness. With these details, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* reflects the societal views of its time. Indeed, one reason that so many Americans feared communism was that it creates a society in which “conformity [is] raised to the position of a prime virtue and [in which] the individual is sacrificed to the group” (Carson). The fact that Finney’s aliens are also portrayed as malicious creates the overall effect of reflecting the tendency in Cold War era-America to see communism as a dangerous ideology that replaces freedom, liberty, and the individual with totalitarianism and mindless, emotionless conformity.

Invasion of the Body Snatchers also mirrors the way that so many Americans who lived through the Cold War feared that communism would spread to the United States. Indeed, Americans were afraid that the ideology of communism, which was most prominently found in the USSR, would spread throughout Europe and permeate even the social and political fabric of the United States (“Red Scare”). During the Cold War, “the intense rivalry between [the United States and the USSR] raised concerns in the United States that Communists and leftist sympathizers inside America might actively work as Soviet spies and pose a threat to U.S.

security” (“Red Scare”). This particular fear—the fear that the conformity and totalitarian nature of communism could infiltrate every part of American life—is reflected in Finney’s work. As Miles, the main character, notes, “The men, women, and children in the street and stores below me were something else now, every last one of them. They were each our enemies, including those with the eyes, faces, gestures, and walks of old friends” (Finney 159). Furthermore, he delivers a statement that stems from fear and horrific realization: “There was no help for us here, except from each other, and even now the communities around us were being invaded” (159). With these words, Miles reveals that even his hometown and the people he loves most—his family, friends, and neighbors—are susceptible to the mindless control and hyperconformity of the alien pods. Similarly, many Americans who lived through the Cold War feared that such a thing could also happen to their own nation, as well as within their own communities and neighborhoods, turning friends into enemies and undermining homeland security. Thus, Finney’s work embodies the fears that ran rampant in the United States with regards to communism.

Furthermore, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* reflects how much paranoia overtook Americans in the midst of the Cold War. Just as fear of communism led to the Red Scare and the use of extreme measures to eliminate any trace of communism in the United States (“Anti-Communism”), so the characters in the novel experience extreme anxiety and confusion about the invading alien pods. At the very beginning of the novel, the main character, Miles, issues the following statement: “I warn you that what you’re starting to read is full of loose ends and unanswered questions. It will not be neatly tied up at the end, everything resolved and satisfactorily explained” (Finney 1). Thus, the narrator sets the tone of the novel by creating a setting that is full of uncertainty, doubt, and constant questioning. In much the same way,

Americans who lived during the Cold War often faced one fundamental question: was communism actually a threat in the United States, or were many people in America simply acting out of unfounded paranoia? Indeed, Finney's characters often seem uncertain as to whether alien pods are actually invading or whether people are simply delusional. Mannie, the psychiatrist in the novel, does not believe in the existence of the aliens, attributing the whole supposed phenomenon to "mass hysteria" (64). Similarly, Wilma, one of the characters who does believe that something is legitimately wrong, still questions her mental sanity: "Oh, my *God*, Miles, am I going crazy? *Tell* me, Miles, tell me; don't spare me, I've got to *know!*" (14). With these words, Wilma conveys the urgency and uncertainty that plague so many of the characters. Numerous individuals in the novel are terrified at the idea that their communities are being invaded by something unnatural, yet they are forever unsure—are the aliens real, or are they the figment of widespread delusion? In much the same way, anticommunism was so prevalent in the Cold War-era United States that Americans often could not be sure about what was real and what was fake—were Communists an actual threat to American society, or did the Red Scare stem from unfounded paranoia?

Ultimately, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* both explores many of the fears that were so prevalent in the United States during the Cold War and offers hope that the conformity and authoritarianism of communism can be defeated. At the end of the novel, some people remain untouched by the alien pods that have taken over most of human civilization and created a society where people mindlessly, emotionlessly conform to a standard of dull sameness (Finney 201). Indeed, although many of the characters succumb to the aliens without a fight, some of the characters still hold out hope for victory, and they are ultimately successful. As Miles notes,

“Many had lost, but some of us who had not been caught and trapped without a chance had fought implacably” (204). By refusing to surrender, these “rugged individualists” (LeGacy 291) who are “out of place in a totalitarian universe” (291) turn Earth into such an “inhospitable planet” (Finney 203) that the aliens are forced to leave. Thus, Finney offers hope that people can resist a system that demands complete submission and obedience, thus retaining their individuality and their humanity. This message would have been a beacon of hope to Americans during the Cold War who feared the rise of communism. By reading Finney’s novel, they could envision a future where freedom and democracy won the day and where people “would never yield” (204) to ideologies that threaten liberty and humanity.

Overall, then, Jack Finney’s *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* offers a glimpse into American society as it existed during the Cold War. Many themes in the novel clearly parallel aspects of Cold War-era reality, and Finney speaks even more broadly to the dangers of group-think and conformity and the superiority of freedom and individuality. In this sense, this novel, which is a prime example of the sci-fi genre, is very much a valid form of literature—for, in contrast to what certain critics claim about sci-fi, this book delves deeply into real issues that confronted real people at a real point in history. Most prominently, it speaks to “Cold War anxieties regarding communist infiltration, atomic warfare, and hyperconformity” (Mann 49). Indeed, its “theme of alien paranoia—the fear that some invisible invaders could replace individual human beings and turn them into a collective of emotionless pod people—resonated with widespread anxieties in 1950s American culture” (Loock 122). At its core, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* deals almost entirely with the nature of human identity and experience, for this novel directly wrestles with problems and fears that impacted real human beings during the Cold

War. Thus, this work is evidence that the sci-fi genre is a valid form of literature, for it is deep and capable of dealing with real-world issues, particularly with regards to human nature.

Cat's Cradle

Another novel that explores Cold War-era problems in the United States is *Cat's Cradle* (1963) by Kurt Vonnegut. Through the use of dark satire, this novel deals with the ever-present threat of nuclear annihilation that confronted Americans—and indeed, people throughout the world—who lived during the Cold War. Crafting this story in the context of Cold War politics, Vonnegut ultimately touches on many topics that relate to humanity, including science, technology, and the nuclear arms race. Just as many Americans who lived in the midst of the Cold War were becoming more skeptical of science and its ability to create progress for humanity, Vonnegut himself became disillusioned with the destruction that could be wreaked by science in the hands of irresponsible men—a message that he tried to communicate in *Cat's Cradle* (“Kurt Vonnegut Talks”). In the course of conveying this message, Vonnegut also delved deeply into the nature of human existence and identity, ultimately determining that the human condition is rather absurd and futile.

Interestingly, Vonnegut himself stated in an interview what he hoped to accomplish with writing *Cat's Cradle*, revealing how much the content of this novel was inspired by real-world developments and issues that concerned the American people during the Cold War. As Vonnegut explained, part of the inspiration for this novel came from his work as a publicist at General Electric (“Kurt Vonnegut Talks”). Through the interviews he conducted with scientists at the company, he discovered that “it was quite conventional for research scientists to be indifferent about what became of their discoveries because they were interested only in truth” (“Kurt

Vonnegut Talks”). Concerned by the general indifference that existed among the scientific community, Vonnegut set out to write a sci-fi novel that would show the dangers of such an approach to science—an approach in which many scientists seem not to care about the potentially destructive results of their research. Like many people, Vonnegut himself was once a science enthusiast, believing that scientific truth could bring about unprecedented progress for mankind (“Kurt Vonnegut Talks”). However, he became “hideously disillusioned when the bomb was dropped on Hiroshima [at the end of World War II]” (qtd. in Arbeiter). Once Vonnegut witnessed the destruction that could be wrought in the name of truth and progress, he declared that humans had discovered “a brand new method for committing suicide” (“Kurt Vonnegut Talks”). Indeed, Vonnegut was not alone in his fears. Particularly after the end of World War II—and at the beginning of the Cold War—people in America became disillusioned with science and feared that the existence of the atomic bomb could result in the end of the world (Wang 322). In fact, “science itself became feared as a potentially totalitarian locus of power in Cold War America” (323). Thus, Vonnegut wrote *Cat’s Cradle* with the purpose of revealing the dangerous foolishness of many people in the scientific community, with this novel revealing not only his own fears, but also the fears of millions living in Cold War-era America.

Influenced by the scientists he talked to at General Electric, Vonnegut explores many aspects of the indifferent, truth-obsessed scientist in the characters in *Cat’s Cradle*. In particular, he modeled the fictional scientist Felix Hoenikker after Irving Langmuir, a real-life atomic scientist whom Vonnegut described as “wonderfully absentminded” (qtd. in Arbeiter) and as “absolutely ambivalent about the possibility of his research ‘falling into the wrong hands’” (qtd. in Arbeiter). Indeed, the character of Felix Hoenikker in *Cat’s Cradle* is revealed to be an

individual who cares only about discovering truth without any concern for the potentially deadly consequences of his research on mankind. Notably, Felix is portrayed as disconnected from humanity. One of his own children comments about him, “People couldn’t get at him because he just wasn’t interested in people. I remember one time, about a year before he died, I tried to get him to tell me something about my mother. He couldn’t remember anything about her” (Vonnegut 13-14). Thus, Felix is so wrapped up in his scientific pursuits that he pays little to no heed to the people around him, even those he should care about most, such as his family members. In contrast to the narrator, Jonah, who wants to learn about “the *human* rather than the *technical* side of the bomb [which Felix helped engineer]” (7), Felix himself is so preoccupied with scientific progress that he loses touch with the importance of other people. Furthermore, Felix is depicted as rather careless in his research. To him, the development of the atomic bomb is mere child’s play. Indeed, when he runs out of other playthings with which to entertain himself, “he just came to work the next day and looked for things to play with and think about, and everything there was to play with and think about had something to do with the bomb” (16). Thus, in the character of Felix, Vonnegut depicts the type of scientists he feared—scientists who sought scientific truth at the expense of all else, including valuing human life and treating their research with seriousness.

Besides Felix Hoenikker, other characters in *Cat’s Cradle* embody the same carelessness and reckless pursuit of scientific truth that Vonnegut so feared. For instance, according to Dr. Asa Breed, another scientist in the novel, “The trouble with the world was that people were still superstitious instead of scientific. He said if everybody would study science more, there wouldn’t be all the trouble there was” (Vonnegut 24). Similarly, Dr. Breed also asserts that “new

knowledge is the most valuable commodity on earth. The more truth we have to work with, the richer we become” (41). Furthermore, although Felix Hoenikker’s children are not scientists, they embody the reckless, careless attitude that Vonnegut so feared in the scientists of his day. As it turns out, before he died, Felix secretly developed a substance called *ice-nine*, which was capable of freezing all water on Earth and bringing about the end of the world (50). After he died, his children divided the *ice-nine* among themselves—and proceeded to use it as a mere bargaining chip. Frank trades his bit of *ice-nine* for a prestigious job on the island of San Lorenzo (241), Angela buys herself “a tomcat husband” (243), and Newt uses his piece to “buy himself a week on Cape Cod with a Russian midget” (243). They do not treat *ice-nine* as something seriously dangerous that represents a threat to all humanity; rather, they use it as a mere plaything and as merely an ends to attain their transient desires.

Cat’s Cradle thus serves as an indictment of people, particularly scientists, who are so disconnected from humanity and from moral responsibility that they allow themselves to engineer something disastrous—even the end of human civilization. For instance, the atomic bomb, which in the novel is developed by Felix Hoenikker and other scientists at a research lab, results in the death of thousands of people at Hiroshima, Japan (Vonnegut 3). Even more drastically, due to the carelessness of Felix’s children—and indeed, due to Felix’s own carelessness, for he was the one who “played puddly games in the kitchen with water and pots and pans and ice-nine” (247), allowing his children to take the *ice-nine* after he died—the *ice-nine* ultimately ends up in the hands of the wrong people, including the dictator of San Lorenzo. This dictator, “Papa” Monzano, commits suicide by taking *ice-nine* (236), an event that leads to, quite literally, the end of the world as all of the water on Earth freezes (261). Thus, Vonnegut

does not simply attack all scientific endeavors; rather, he warns of the danger of “science and technology divorced from a sense of moral responsibility” (Zins 173). Many of Vonnegut’s characters lack a sense of moral responsibility toward their fellow man, resulting in the facilitation of the end of the world at the hands of human stupidity and recklessness.

Ultimately, Vonnegut’s work does not just reflect the context of the Cold War; *Cat’s Cradle* also delves more deeply into human nature, revealing the futility and absurdity of human existence. Just as the pursuit of scientific truth so often leads to pain and destruction (e.g., in the form of the atomic bomb), so *Cat’s Cradle* makes the point that the truth of reality is often ugly and hard to bear. As the character Miss Faust points out, “I just have trouble understanding how truth, all by itself, could be enough for a person” (Vonnegut 54). Indeed, as Vonnegut reveals, the “truth” that comes from science often devalues humans, saying that the “secret of life” is mere “protein” (25). In the face of such truth, human existence is ultimately meaningless, as well as painful.

Thus, in order to bring a sense of peace, happiness, and meaning to their lives, human beings must turn to lies—which, from the viewpoint of *Cat’s Cradle*, involves “the *foma* [harmless truths] that make you brave and kind and healthy and happy” (Vonnegut 1). In *Cat’s Cradle*, Vonnegut presents a religion called Bokononism, which is based entirely on lies. After it “becomes evident that no governmental or economic reform was going to make the people [of San Lorenzo] much less miserable, the religion became the one real instrument of hope” (172). In other words, religion is presented as an opiate—one that is founded on lies but that nevertheless gives people a sense of peace and purpose, something that the bare truth is unable to do. The followers of Bokononism practice a tradition called *boko-maru*, which supposedly bonds

people together in love (206). Furthermore, this religion teaches that God created the world as well as human beings and that “humanity is organized into teams, teams that do God’s Will without ever discovering what they are doing” (2). However, even as Bokononism teaches such things, the sacred “scriptures” of this religion explicitly warn that everything about Bokononism is founded on “bittersweet lies” (2). Indeed, the founder of Bokononism says that he “made up lies / So that they all fit nice, / And I made this sad world / A par-a-dise” (127).

Thus, Vonnegut attempts to delve into the nature of human existence. In a world where truth leads to meaninglessness and dissatisfaction, humanity can only turn to white lies that are intended to give people a sense of purpose and happiness. Even more absurdly, these lies cannot change the ugly truth of reality—indeed, the people of San Lorenzo have an incredibly low standard of living, yet they “don’t have to pay as much attention to the awful truth” (Vonnegut 174) because of their religion, which gives them happiness through “the living legend of the cruel tyrant in the city and the gentle holy man in the jungle” (174). As Vonnegut attempts to show, the lies that humans tell themselves cannot alter reality, yet they are the best that humanity can hope for—for without these lies, people would be reduced to mere “protein” (25), meaningless blips in the world that have no value, purpose, and destiny.

Overall, within the pages of *Cat’s Cradle*, Kurt Vonnegut accomplishes a two-fold purpose: he both explores the fears that plagued him and millions of other people living in Cold War America, and he attempts to answer questions about the nature of human identity and existence. Within *Cat’s Cradle*, “science destroys the world and human life” (Entezam and Abbasi 4), revealing Vonnegut’s fear that careless, morally bankrupt scientists could engineer the very end of human existence. In addition, he delves into the absurdity of the human condition:

the “truth” of science tells people that they lack inherent value and meaning, and the truth of reality is that millions of people suffer under a terrible existence. Thus, the only way for humans to preserve their sanity and peace of mind is to live by lies—lies which tell people that their lives are meaningful, giving people a sense of peace and happiness. However, as comforting as these lies are, they cannot change the painful truth of reality. Thus, within the pages of *Cat’s Cradle*, “both science and religion function as foma [lies]: science is presented as creative progress, yet leads to complete destruction, while religion, even an intentionally made one like Bokononism, cannot solve the problems of poor peoples’ lives” (4). Indeed, *Cat’s Cradle* is another example of the validity of the sci-fi literary genre, for this sci-fi novel deals almost exclusively with matters pertaining to the real world of human existence—both in the context of the Cold War specifically and more broadly in the nature of universal humanity.

Earth Abides

Earth Abides (1949) by George R. Stewart is a unique Cold War-era sci-fi novel in that it not only grapples with fears about the world ending, but also provides a creative outlet in which Stewart explores the possibilities for what could happen to humanity after an apocalypse. In contrast to *Cat’s Cradle*, which also deals with Cold War anxiety about nuclear weapons, *Earth Abides* seems to serve less as a warning about the foolishness of humanity and more of an exploration of what could happen to mankind in the face of an apocalypse. Indeed, Stewart’s novel appears to be less moralistic than *Cat’s Cradle*, focusing more on imagining future developments than on serving as social commentary. As a work of post-apocalyptic sci-fi, this novel serves “not as a literature of pessimism or warning but as a radical context to explore dangerous possibilities” (Doyle 99). Furthermore, although *Earth Abides* is somewhat sobering

and saddening in the way it portrays the end of human civilization, it also offers hope that humans will continue to find a way forward and rebuild the world, even in the face of disaster. Ultimately, *Earth Abides* uses a post-apocalyptic setting to grapple with fundamental questions about what it means to be human in this world.

Although *Earth Abides* deals more with the aftermath of a global disaster than with the crisis itself, Stewart's method of portraying a virus that virtually wipes out humanity closely parallels the impending sense of doom that faced many Americans in the midst of the Cold War. During the Cold War, the incessant stockpiling of nuclear weapons in both the United States and the USSR created a sense that mankind had reached "the point of no return, a feeling of teetering on death" (Buck). Indeed, one survey found that "many [schoolchildren] reported feeling helpless and powerless in the face of nuclear war" (Buck). It appears that many people living through the Cold War, especially children, felt sheer dread at the idea that humanity could be virtually wiped out if nuclear war were to break out. These people often felt hopeless and unable to defend themselves in the face of a threat that far outweighed the strength of humanity.

This sense of powerlessness and helplessness in the face of an insurmountable disaster is reflected in *Earth Abides*. In the novel, the crisis that confronts humanity is not something that can be controlled. Indeed, people are "overwhelmed by the attack of some new and unknown disease of unparalleled rapidity of spread, and fatality" (Stewart 13). This virus "springs up simultaneously in almost every center of civilization, outrunning all attempts at quarantine" (14). In other words, the threat that humans face in this novel is beyond the scope of human control—it does not stem from mankind's wrongdoings, nor can it be controlled by any tools that human beings have invented, no matter how valiant the people facing it might be (15). Mankind is

utterly defenseless and powerless in the face of such destruction, a theme that appears reminiscent of how many people felt about the threat of nuclear war in the midst of the Cold War—and a theme that provides a setting in which Stewart probes the nature of human existence and identity as he explores the fate of humanity in a post-apocalyptic world.

Indeed, one aspect of humanity that *Earth Abides* explores is the way in which human beings might interact with one another if the world were to end. Notably, this “story deals exclusively with the aftermath of the disaster as the characters in the novel are simply left wandering a world suddenly empty of people, but otherwise completely intact” (Horne). If human civilization were to end, leaving very few survivors, how would the remaining people interact with other human beings? On the one hand, some people may behave as the main character, Ish, does early in the novel. Upon returning from a trip to the mountains and discovering that most of humanity has died of a mysterious plague in his absence, Ish is originally “not greatly perturbed even at the thought that he might be the only person left in the world” (Stewart 17). To Ish, at least at the beginning of the story, to be entirely alone, even potentially for a lifetime, is no great tragedy.

However, as time goes on, Ish gradually finds himself longing more for human company. Although he spends a long time wandering alone across the desolate United States, he finds joy and comfort in settling down with other human beings when he meets Emma. While spending an evening with her, Ish sensed that this “was no mere casual meeting—or passing moment. In this lay all the future” (Stewart 103). Indeed, he finds happiness in simple things like sharing a meal with Emma and laughing with her over shared jokes (103). Upon their first meeting, he even finds himself imagining that he and she “might say some kind of marriage vows” (104). Thus,

Earth Abides explores different possibilities for how survivors might cope in the face of worldwide disaster—they might strike out on their own, relieved to be free of other human beings, or they might find a “tribe” of other people to settle down with, much as Ish ultimately does (134).

Another aspect of human existence that Stewart explores is the role of religion among humanity in the wake of a worldwide disaster. Indeed, religious traditions and beliefs have long been a vital part of human society, with almost every culture in the history of the world following some sort of religious worldview. As Stewart explores, if the world were to end, the few survivors might find themselves clinging to “bits of religion, [which would] give comfort and confidence to people who might often need it badly, and supply a core of solidity and union to the community” (Stewart 138)—as the characters in *Earth Abides* do when they attempt to hold a church service (138). For people who live through an apocalypse, religion might be an opiate by which people cope with the pain of loss and try to make sense of seemingly meaningless suffering. However, as Stewart’s characters discover, the existence of religion in a post-apocalyptic world might simply “cultivat[e] disunion rather than unity of feeling, and sham more than true religion” (138). Indeed, this begs the question: if the world ends, will (and should) people cling to religious traditions from the past, or would such practices be out of date? Should they turn to God for comfort or abandon the idea of religion, as Stewart’s characters do (138), and simply rely on themselves to find their way in a drastically altered world?

Perhaps the most prominent theme that *Earth Abides* explores with relation to humans is the exploration of what the world would look like without human domination and civilization. Stewart refrains from saying that Earth would be either better or worse without humans—rather,

he simply shows how it would be different. For instance, “Earth Abides insistently returns to distinctly successional images as nature either ‘reclaims’ or simply emerges among the traces of the built environment humanity has left behind” (Polefrone 257). Early on in the novel, Stewart writes the following of Ish: “During thousands of years man had impressed himself upon the world. Now man was gone, certainly for a while, perhaps forever. What would happen to the world and its creatures without man? *That* he was left to see!” (25). Throughout *Earth Abides*, Stewart demonstrates that the vanishing of human civilization creates mixed results: on the one hand, without human domination, animals and plants will begin to repopulate areas that were once occupied by people, as is evident when ants begin to swarm Ish’s abandoned neighborhood in such high numbers that he wonders, “With the removal of man were they [the ants] now destined to inherit the earth?” (Stewart 89). On the other hand, even as some aspects of the world are quick to forget about humanity—indeed, even as many animals go on with their lives and forget the existence of humans—others feel the loss acutely. For instance, the sheep who have so long relied on human protection will face increased danger and even possible extinction without the presence of shepherds to guard and care for them (54). Thus, Stewart reflects on the dichotomy of human existence: humans have left a mark on the world that will remain long after they are gone; yet at the same time, Earth will continue without them and forget them in many ways.

Finally, *Earth Abides* explores humans’ propensity to cling to the past even as they pave the way for the future, something that becomes especially evident in a post-apocalyptic landscape. Indeed, at many points throughout the novel, the characters find themselves irrevocably drawn to the ways and traditions of the past—a tendency that impacts their

connection with the future. As Stewart describes early in the novel, “There was no particular reason, he [Ish] realized, why he should sit in his own car rather than in some other. There was no more question of property right” (Stewart 15). However, although Ish recognizes that societal laws about property should theoretically no longer apply in a world where people, for the most part, no longer exist, some societal habits have become so ingrained in his very nature that he cannot escape the influence of the past. His tendency to live according to past traditions is again evident when he “reflect[s] that there was really no need even to wash the dishes” (Stewart 19), yet he does so anyway because it is what he is accustomed to doing—people customarily wash their dishes when they finish meals, and such a trivial custom may carry over even into a post-apocalyptic world. Notably, Ish later expresses concern that his “Tribe” of friends and family is too reliant on relics of the past and too incapable of blazing a new trail forward, as is evident when he declares, “We can’t go on scavenging like this forever, we must go forward” (Stewart 156). However, at the same time, it is also Ish who “values the Library as the record of the once great civilization and [views] its preservation as the only hope that humanity may once again think deeply and do great things” (Horne). Ish may say that he wants to separate from the past, yet, for good or ill, he never fully can. His own personal past and the history of humanity have become essential to his very nature, revealing the tendency of humanity to move forward and make progress even while, almost subconsciously, clinging to bits of the past.

Overall, *Earth Abides* both reflects societal fears of its time—most prominently, the paranoia surrounding nuclear weapons during the Cold War—even as it also delves into deeper questions about human nature and the possibilities for human existence in the aftermath of a global disaster. Stewart takes a very even-handed approach to the topics he grapples with,

appearing to use this novel as a creative outlet for considering possibilities for humanity's future, rather than as a moralistic tale that tries to urge people toward or away from a specific course of action. Thus, *Earth Abides* is yet another powerful example of the validity of the sci-fi genre—for this novel deals primarily with fundamental questions about mankind, both in the context of the Cold War and more broadly in terms of universal questions about human nature.

Sci-Fi: Shaping Military Policy and Technology during the Cold War

Just as numerous sci-fi works explored various issues that American society faced at the time of the Cold War, so sci-fi proved to be a source of inspiration that shaped American military policy and technology during this period. With the advice and collaboration of many sci-fi authors, President Ronald Reagan was able to devise a strategy that gave the United States a significant advantage over the USSR and helped secure victory for the West (Busch 463). Significantly, it was not a particular work of sci-fi that worked so powerfully to influence how the United States approached the Cold War. Rather, what played such a significant role was the creativity of numerous sci-fi authors, people who were accustomed to speculating about the future of humanity and of technology in the books they wrote (Bankston). Thus, the way that these novelists impacted the real world of American politics and military tactics points to the immense potential for sci-fi to shape and refine human thought and creativity, which in turn can have a significant effect on how human affairs play out. Sci-fi is very much a legitimate form of literature, for it has the ability to influence real historical events and technologies, revealing its capability to shape the reality in which humans live.

Early Cold War Strategy in the United States

Due to the influence of various sci-fi authors under the Reagan administration, the

American strategy for defeating the Soviet Union and communism underwent significant change. Initially, President Reagan followed the policy of containment, which his predecessors in office, particularly Harry Truman, had adhered to in the beginning of the Cold War (Busch 452). This policy held that the United States needed to contain communism and prevent it from spreading into more countries (452). This approach consisted of three main steps: defense buildup, the restoration of containment, and the strengthening of American alliances (452-3). Another element of this strategy was the concept of mutually assured destruction (MAD), the idea that the risk of devastating nuclear retaliation would prevent either the United States or the Soviet Union from being the first country to launch a nuclear strike (455). Ultimately, during the Cold War, the United States originally followed a defensive strategy that reflected a desire to avoid all-out war (452).

Contributions from Sci-Fi Literature and Authors

While the initial American strategy during the Cold War was to avoid war altogether, this plan stood in direct opposition to what sci-fi authors had been trying to demonstrate through the subgenre of military sci-fi works for a long time: that war is tragic yet inevitable (Gray 316). Many sci-fi authors understood this, and they thus opposed the policy of MAD for being unrealistic (Andrews 139). As a result, they took action to revolutionize the American war strategy and ensure victory over the Soviets and communism. Led by sci-fi writers like Jerry Pournelle and Larry Niven, many prominent American citizens formed an advocacy group called the “Citizens’ Advisory Council on National Space Policy” (139). This council was made up of numerous astronauts, engineers, computer scientists, and military officers; however, several members, including the group’s founders, Jerry Pournelle and Larry Niven, were sci-fi authors

(139). The council members met regularly to discuss ideas for new technology and for an effective, long-term strategy that would defeat the Soviet Union, put the United States on the offensive (Busch 454), and “undermine the Cold War policy of MAD” (Andrews 139).

Created by a joint action of the American Astronautical Society and the Lagrangian Point 5 (L5) Society, the council drafted several reports for the president proposing ways that the United States could feasibly increase its presence in space and thus improve the country’s defense (Gluckman). Such committee reports and strategic planning documents from the council focused on ideas for a futuristic, highly advanced, and hypothetical weapons system (Gluckman). Significantly, the ideas proposed in these papers eventually came to fruition in real technologies, such as the Thor satellite system and the Delta Clipper Experimental (DC-X) test rocket (Bankston). Most importantly, the group’s reports and proposals helped lead to Reagan’s establishment of the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), a proposed missile shield in space that could intercept Soviet missiles (Andrews 140). Thus, by urging the creation of a strong national space policy, the council (headed by sci-fi authors) left an indelible mark on developments in American military policy and technology (140).

Results of the Efforts of Sci-Fi Authors

In the end, the SDI, a program that was launched largely through the creativity of sci-fi authors, only lasted for a few years before the U.S. government abandoned this research program (Busch 452). Nevertheless, the program served a valuable purpose by making the Soviets realize that if the SDI were successful, the United States would gain strategic superiority, and the Soviet Union would be too weak, both economically and technologically, to counter such a defense system (455). Thus, this led to demoralization among Soviet leaders and prompted them to see

the need for modernization in their own society, which could only be achieved through creating a freer society (456). Overall, the efforts of numerous sci-fi writers helped lead to the SDI, which achieved a certain level of victory despite its eventual failure (456).

Controversy has raged for years over whether or not the SDI truly influenced Soviet attitudes and military policies to any great degree. In fact, much evidence points to the fact that the SDI prompted numerous developments in the Soviet Union during the Cold War. For instance, Soviet officials admitted that the program instilled serious concerns and fears in the Soviet leadership, undermining their confidence that the USSR could win the war (Busch 461). Furthermore, while many factors played into Soviet military policies during the Cold War, the presence of the SDI exerted a particularly strong influence on such policies (462). For instance, after the introduction of the SDI, defense and space programs became contentious, worrisome issues during the U.S.-Soviet arms control negotiations (462). In addition, during the summit meetings between the two countries in 1985 and 1986, the Soviet Union frequently raised the SDI as a central issue that needed to be discussed (463). Evidence even points to the fact that the Soviet Union was willing to give up its offensive weapons if the United States would limit the SDI program, revealing the high level of value that the Soviets placed on the SDI (Hemmer 102). Thus, through the efforts of numerous sci-fi authors, the American strategy for fighting the Cold War was altered in a way that put immense pressure on Soviet leadership and paved the way to American victory.

The Impact of Sci-Fi on Human Society: Beyond the Cold War

Ultimately, the influence of sci-fi on Cold War policies and technology in the United States set a precedent for future developments. In modern times, sci-fi still contributes to military

culture, strategies, and policies in the United States. For instance, many three letter agencies consult with a think tank made up of sci-fi writers, the Marines use sci-fi to speculate about the future of war, and many military academies require that trainees read certain sci-fi novels (Bankston). Thus, following the precedent of the Cold War, sci-fi continues to be viewed as a valuable tool in the real world for imagining and preparing for future war.

The Validity and Potential of Sci-Fi as a Literary Genre

Overall, a reciprocal relationship of influence existed between sci-fi and the real world in the United States during the Cold War: sci-fi authors helped develop the idea for the Strategic Defense Initiative, and, in turn, real societal fears about war and technology influenced many works of sci-fi, including *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, *Cat's Cradle*, and *Earth Abides*. The intertwined nature of American culture and sci-fi during the Cold War points to the broader significance of sci-fi as a literary genre. Sci-fi provides an imaginative space for thinking through human hopes and fears as well as implications of real-world developments, such as technology. Furthermore, the speculative nature of sci-fi can spark a kind of creativity that often manifests itself in real-world developments, as was the case with American military policy and technology during the Cold War. Indeed, the events of the Cold War set a precedent for the use of sci-fi in the realm of the military, revealing important implications for how sci-fi can continue to be used both in the military and in culture as a whole into the future.

Thus, science fiction has proven itself to be a “true” form of literature through its ability to wrestle with real-world topics and issues that affected every aspect of people’s lives. Sci-fi is, at its very core, all about questions that relate to human identity, experience, and behavior. It serves as a way to reflect what is happening in the world, to warn people away from certain

ideologies or patterns of behavior, to work out solutions that can solve real-world problems, and to offer people hope for a better future—if only humanity will learn from its mistakes and work towards a better future. Oftentimes, as is revealed in the American sci-fi novels that came out of the Cold War, not every sci-fi author will look at a particular topic in exactly the same way. However, that only emphasizes the power of sci-fi even more—it is a tool for wild speculation and exploration, offering insights into the nature of human identity and experience.

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