

Reflections

Disability in Science Fiction Literature: A Reflection on Technology and Mental Disabilities

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Disability in SF novels is quite a multifaceted phenomenon. On the one hand, many fictional visions of the future simply avoid disabilities, presuming that one day humanity will be able to cure any disability through advanced medicine and technology. On the other hand, however, many SF authors speculate about the disabilities that such highly developed societies could bring forth. Consequently, a frequently underlined assumption is that every society, no matter how highly developed, has its own unique set of disabilities.

A prime example of this future-specific approach is served by Isaac Asimov's robot novels. Hardly any physical disabilities are portrayed in these texts, yet what is presented with significant regularity are the boundaries of the mind, especially in the last installment of the series *Robots and Empire*.

Firstly, the people of earth live in the so-called caves of steel, completely unable to survive in the outside world and alienated from nature. Secondly, there are the people of Solaria, who do not mind strolling around in the natural world, yet, on the other hand, shy away from physical contact with others. They never "view" each other in person, the only option for interpersonal contact is to "see" others over video screens. Lastly, the advanced Aurorans also have their own disabilities. Their longevity coupled with their immense egos is shown to be inherently problematic for progress. Asimov foregrounds, through both the fictional planets, Aurora and Solaria, that our own mortality is, indeed, essential. The next generation has to take over to keep humanity's social evolution going. On Aurora and Solaria, however, cooperation and reproduction are largely frowned upon and kept to a minimum. The individual scientist who dedicates centuries to the progress of society — as is for example represented in the character of Dr. Fastolfe — is the cultural icon of the spacer worlds.

Asimov highlights that it is this iconization of the lone wolf scientist, in combination with their complete dependency on robots and their extreme longevity which leads to societal stagnation and, in the long run, decay. Thus, the spacers of Aurora and Solaria serve as a glimpse of the negative ramifications of severely extended human lifespans and overdependence on technology. This message is foregrounded as the settlers from Earth manage to overcome the aforementioned mental and social disabilities, which hold back the people of Aurora, Solaria, and Earth, on their new planet Baleyworld. The vanishing of these disabilities is portrayed to directly correlate with the exclusion of robots from the face of newly founded human societies, as their technological perfection is highlighted as one of the major culprits for humanity's downward spiral.

William Gibson, as a second example, has quite a different take on disabilities, displayed in his short stories and *Neuromancer* novels. Characters such as Case, the protagonist of *Neuromancer*, are depicted as being extremely drawn to drug use, a need which constitutes a severe disability of its own. The dimensions of substance abuse in Gibson's stories are fascinating, as they not only create boundaries and issues for the characters to overcome, but also seem to enable said characters to endure the hardships of their very existences.

Furthermore, in his short stories, "The Winter Market" and "Dogfight," Gibson (in "Dogfight" together with Swanwick) also puts the spotlight on disabled characters and how technology shapes their lived experiences. Lise, one of the main characters from "The Winter Market," can only survive because of her modern exoskeleton and aspires to free her mind from her material shackles. Our question then becomes, do we lose our humanity when we overcome all of our disabilities, all of our flesh's boundaries? The fate of Lise and a handful of other name-

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-less characters, who transcend the body by digitizing their minds, suggests otherwise. In this Gibson's work echoes the final novel of Asimov's robot cycle.

In "Dogfight" Deke, Nance, and Tiny are all disabled in different ways. Deke and Nance have undergone mental programming that prevents them from having certain experiences, and Tiny is bound to a wheelchair due to unknown causes. Each of them seeks to overcome their limits through technology and biotechnology. Yet, as we can see with the social downfall of Deke, who supposedly kills Nance, his only friend, and later on with Tiny's failure in a video game against Deke, Gibson's technology functions as a temporal escape with a harsh timer. Again, modern technology takes the form of a drug that sustains the lives of Gibson's run-down characters until it too, eventually fails them.

As a final example, Dan Simmons' *Hyperion* series, when compared to the works of Asimov and Gibson, represents disabilities in a more traditional fashion. A prime example of this is the speech impairment of Martin Silenus during a segment of his story in the first book. It is a sequence that is only roughly ten pages long, but the struggle of the bad-mannered, yet ingenious, poet Silenus, who can only communicate and write with a handful of swear words, calls to mind the despair that speech impairment can cause an otherwise healthy and intelligent person.

Furthermore, the interplay of decay and immortality triggered by technology is also taken up by Simmons. The Bikura, who are featured in the first story told by the character Lenar Hoyt, are a prime example of how overdependence on technology comes with a price. They are immortal, yet doomed to a sexless, mindless existence, their brains infantilized by constant rebirth through the power of the cruciform. This negative aspect of techno-dependency is fur-

ther highlighted when the hegemony falls apart in *Fall of Hyperion* and the greatest part of the population dies because their survival depends on technological marvels, such as the farcasters.

A last fascinating take on disability from the *Hyperion* series is the story of Rachel Weintraub and her father Sol. Rachel catches a mystical illness called Merlin's sickness, which reverses her aging process, making her forget her life by the day. Sol Weintraub struggles with his daughter's sickness and the challenge of her memory impairment, while Rachel despairs as she loses her identity. The way this dramatic story is rendered makes it a stunning and convincing metaphor for the struggles that families and patients go through when they develop dementia. It reflects on the suffering of relatives, who have to accept that there is no way to save their loved ones, no way to retain their personalities; also, the constant fear experienced by a parent to a heavily disabled child for its health, and the agony of losing the foundation of one's identity. All of these aspects are mirrored in Simmons' alternative concept of dementia.

As I have showcased in this short reflection, the absence of future disabilities is, in my humble opinion, only one side of the coin, when it comes to the representation of disabilities in SF novels. Asimov, Gibson and Simmons, as well as many other SF authors, such as Margret Atwood, Dmitry Glukhovskiy, or Arthur C. Clark, present distant future worlds to the readers, in most of which the *condicio humana* is still significantly shaped by disabilities.

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