HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

Hugvísindasvið

A Generic Study of *The Man Who Fell to Earth* by Walter Tevis

Ritgerð til BA-prófs í Ensku

ENS 231L

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Janúar 2013

Háskóli Íslands

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Leiðbeinandi: Martin Regal
haustönn 2013

Abstract

The following essay attempts a surface exploration both the genre of science fiction and Walter Tevis' novel *The Man Who Fell to Earth*. Its main purpose surrounds the question of whether Tevis' novel is in fact a science fiction novel, and if so, why it can be classified as such. To begin with there is a brief overview of the genre's history, where certain landmark works are highlighted as structural foundations of science fiction lineage. The question of what constitutes science fiction will be discussed and explored in some depth to establish a ground from which the essay's questions can be answered. Different definitions of the genre are discussed in some detail and used to establish a basis from where a conclusion is drawn from. There is much debate that surrounds the issue of science fiction. Ever since its coinage in the early 20th century the genre has spawned many sub-genres. It is a well documented fact that no consensus has been reach about neither the origin of science fiction nor its proper definition. The essay will not attempt to solve those pending issues, but rather broadly survey this literary field and examine what science fiction really is, and hopefully reach a satisfying conclusion to the question of what Walter Tevis' novel is in terms of generic classification. This will not be a detailed or an extensive analysis but rather a surface exploration of both genre and novel.

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Foreword

Debates surrounding the definition and generic features of science fiction have raged ever since term was first coined in the 1920s. While this composite word seems self-explanatory, many writers and critics have seen science fiction as more than an umbrella-term that requires finer definition in specific applications. This is one of the principle areas of exploration in this essay. In order to make any sense of such an exploration I must delve into the depths of the genre itself, what that concept means and, what we think we mean when applying it to literary works and films. The text I propose to examine here is Walter Tevis's novel, *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (1963), and the questions I pose mainly concern its genre. Is this novel science fiction rather than a romance, a melodrama, a tragedy or even a horror story? Would it be better classified within one of the many sub-genres of science fiction, somewhere between "hard SF" (that prides itself on accurate and measureable scientific extrapolation) and "space opera" (an extravagant tale which focuses on adventure, action and the heroic and spectacular), or even within a further subcategory.

Written in the 1960s, *The Man Who Fell to Earth* falls within what is called the New Wave era of science fiction where a concerted effort was made to promote the genre among adult readers. Up to that time, it was primarily the domain of teenagers, who devoured its plethora of fantastic stories in the pulp-magazines of the time. In order to promote its image, various features, tropes and themes were expanded and the art form began to erode the very distinctive line that stood between early science fiction and mainstream literature. This erosion began in a number of celebrated pulp magazines and progressed from there via the works of Tevis, Isaac Asimov, Robert Heinlein, Alfred Bester, who some claim to be the father of modern science fiction, and many

others from the 1950s to the late 1970s. *The Man Who Fell to Earth* thus serves as good case study when to explore the boundaries between "old fashion" science fiction and the New Wave since it stands almost exactly between the world of pulp science fiction and the mature literary form that science fiction has become today.

A Brief History of Science Fiction

In order to clarify the problems involved in classifying *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, it is first necessary to map out the general history of the genre. The term *science fiction* was coined in 1929 by Hugo Gernsback, who used it to describe recurrent themes and features in certain literary texts, the most prominent of which were written by Jules Verne and H.G Wells. This "consolidation," as James Kelly and John Kessel put it, "into a pulp genre" (Kelly 8) certainly did not spring full-blown from the head of Zeus, but was rather the result of pressure that built up in the 19th century, a surge of literary work that speculated in one way or another on the possible effects of technology and science on life in the present and/or the future, both on earth and on other planets. These speculations ran almost parallel with advancements made in technology and the "hard" sciences of the day but that dates back to the steam engines of the Industrial Revolution that first helped to turn science fiction (subsequently abbreviated as SF) into becoming the umbrella term it has become today. Adam Roberts rightly suggests that "[t]he identification of a point of origin for science fiction is as fiercely contested a business as defining the form" and therefore I propose no point of origin, but rather suggest that a growing corpus of literary works eventually demanded recognition and were ultimately amalgamated into what we now categorize as SF. The formation of the genre was slow at first. One of the earliest examples of pre-SF was Johannes Kepler's *Somnium* (c. 1600), a story about an Icelander's trip to the moon that differed in one particular way

to other similar tales, such as Lucian's *Vera Historia* (c. 150), that preceded it, because it had a basis in scientific discovery. In his work, Kepler contemplates and foresees difficulties which might arise during such a trip and is thus, as Roberts puts it in his essay *The Copernican Revolution*, "solidly science-based … [and] captures exactly the shift in sensibilities that enabled [SF] to come into being" (Bould 6). Kepler's work can be seen as among the first indicators of what later became a conscious attempt on the part of SF writers to sever the umbilical cord with its predecessors – fantasy and the myth. Another landmark development of SF is Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), a speculation on the human condition in the face of the much increased technological powers man was starting to develop. A. J. Cuddon is surely right in his assessment that this is "*the* key work" in structural foundation of the SF lineage (Cuddon 793, author's italics). After Shelley, SF, still not formally recognized as such, experienced an "explosion of [SF] type narratives […] that can only be understood within the […] context of the industrial revolution" as Arthur Evans puts it (Bould 13). This surge was most visible in the works of Jules Verne and H. G. Wells, whose impact, according to John Rieder, "was crucial to the formation of SF" in a marketplace that was eager "for tales oriented toward the future, stories that extrapolated upon recent scientific and technological discoveries" (Bould 26). Following the boom in the 19th century, Hugo Gernsback and John Campbell then proceeded to establish the pulp genre of SF. Even though this was perhaps of "disreputable coinage," as Brian Stableford remarks (Stableford xxi), it was Gernsback who "made [SF] a recognized literary form" that Campbell later "improved and expanded" (Westfahl 1). It can be argued that SF burst on to the literary scene with a force rooted in man's own anxieties about technology, the future and man's existence in a rapidly changing world. Technological and futuristic

extrapolations have in large been the stable of SF and have served well in the largely escapist mode of literature. However, as Brooks Landon claims, "SF is the literature of change" (Landon xi) and as such the genre has expanded its reach into all spheres of the human condition.

What is Science Fiction?

Providing a satisfactory answer to this question is a task many have taken on and failed. Observing this problem, James Kelly and Patrick Kessell speak of a website that "lists fifty different definition," many of them from the finest minds in the field of SF and yet none of them adequate (Kelly 12). Since SF is mainly a genre that deals with change, it is not likely that this problem will solve itself in the near future. Despite the question at the head of this section, there is no intention here to define SF, rather to weigh pre-existing definitions against one another in order to position *The Man Who Fell to Earth* rather than "classify [the novel] in one or another pigeonhole" (Freedman xvi). When people look at a SF movie or read a SF novel, their ideas of what the genre comprises are nevertheless vague. "Most people have a sense of what science fiction is" as Roberts points out. However, various problems remain, as becomes most evident when one tries, as Roberts asserts, "specify[ing] in what way SF is distinctive, and in what ways it is different from other imaginative and fantastic literatures" (Roberts 1). Cuddon, in his *Dictionary of Literary Terms & Literary Theory* '(791), remarks that SF is a prose narrative "about an amazing variety of things, topics [and] ideas," a statement that hardly helps matters. The fact is that the genre of SF has successfully crossed with most other genres, such as the romance, the comedy, the melodrama, the heroic, the fantasy, the myth, the musical, and most recently the western. In all these stories the important factor is the difference between the story-world and the real world – the degree with

which the story-world is altered from the empirical world the writer lives in. This actually means that a story can theoretically be SF when written and ceased to be so if the story's extrapolations prove accurate. Although these differences are the key to identify the work as SF they also serve as a separator between other types of literature that do the same thing; the fantasy, the fairy-tale and the myth drastically change their worlds but do so using other premises and thus become something entirely different from SF. Roberts speaks of "points of difference" (Roberts 6) and Darko Suvin calls this "a *novum* or cognitive innovation," which he says is a "relationship deviating from the author's and implied reader's norm of reality" (Suvin 64). As these points of difference are helpful in identifying SF and other fantasy literature, it is in the way that these differences are presented within the story that holds the key to their individual classification. In short, the framework of SF is concerned with the rational approach in its description of the story world, while fantasy, for example, is not; in the latter, the world simply is *as it is* and an explanation is never a concern, and certainly not a scientific one. Darko Suvin's theory of *cognitive estrangement* combined with Adam Roberts' example are perhaps the best way to illustrate this difference and thus the difference between fantasy and SF, a matter that receives further consideration later in the essay. Although most SF is not in any way realistic in its futuristic extrapolations and resembles the fantasy in many ways (especially in the depiction of an alternative world), it is important to make a distinction between these two genres. To do this one needs to draw boundaries rather than attempt an exhaustive definition.

The literature of fantasy also drastically alters its world but this difference between the fictional world and the real world is what separates SF from other fantastic literature such as fantasy and myth and other supernatural genres. The way in which

these differences are then passed through the story becomes the key in determining whether it is SF or something else. Since other genres depict similar uncanny worlds the distinction between the genres has to come from how these differences, or *nova*, are introduced into each world. Elves and pixies are frequently used in fantasy literature and aliens from other planets are equally used in SF. Both instances are points of differences in a story world. However, the two are not a part of the same genre because the aliens are rooted in the scientific imagination and are still a remote scientific possibility, so to speak, while elves came into being out of a storytelling tradition, the human imagination working on its own, and have empirically been proven non-existent. The *science* in SF is certainly not a coincidence, it serves a distinct purpose. It separates the genre from other fantasy literature.

Cognitive Estrangement and Other Definitions

Arguably, the most influential SF scholar is Darko Suvin. His definition of *cognitive estrangement* separates SF from its parent genres, myth and fantasy by suggesting that "SF is […] a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment" (Suvin 375). The *cognition* part is, in Roberts' words, what "prompts us to try and understand, to comprehend the alien landscape" of the SF story, while the *estrangement* is taken from Berthold Brecht's idea of 'alienation' and "refers to that element of SF that we recognize as different, that 'estranges' us from the familiar" according to Roberts (Roberts 8). As Suvin puts it, "[t]he estrangement differentiates [SF] from the 'realistic' literary mainstream […]. The cognition differentiates it not only from myth, but also from the fairy tale and the fantasy" (Suvin 375). Simon Spiegel, in his paper, "Things

Made Strange: On the Concept of 'Estrangement' in Science Fiction Theory," contests Suvin's definition and particularly his use of the concept of estrangement, stating that SF "does not estrange the familiar, but rather makes the strange familiar" arguing that the formal level of SF is not estrangement as Suvin would have it but "naturalization" (Spiegel 372), further stating that fairies are not familiar to us and have no "referents in the empirical world" (Spiegel 371) and are thus naturalized, not estranged. However, the two are in basic agreement on the difference between fantasy and SF; Spiegel speaks of this difference in terms of SF's employment of "aesthetics of technology" and especially how SF attempts to "naturalize," and therefore neutralize, its differences by applying a certain "techno-scientific look" on tools used in everyday life for instance (Spiegel 372). The simplest way to understand these differences is by looking at an example that Roberts uses to make a distinction between SF and other fantastic literature. Ian Watson's *The Jonah Kit* and Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis* are classified differently, even though both novels are "based on the premise of radical change [and] neither are concerned with space or time travel, or are set on other planets" as Roberts notes. The reason for this different classification is, according to Roberts, that "Kafka never explains how his hero turns into a bug" while Watson's metamorphosis "is placed in a context of scientific research and is given a particular rationalization" (Roberts 4). Suvin on the other hand argues that Kafka's story, among others, such as Stanislaw Lem's *Solaris,* are "perhaps the most significant region of SF, indistinguishable in quality from best mainstream writing" (Suvin 380). Here, Suvin is speaking of "analogical models" of SF that are "based on analogy rather than extrapolation" (Suvin 379) of SF and does not make such a clear distinction between SF and fantasy as Roberts. This can be problematic, as Spiegel points out in his notes since "[t]he

admission that fantasy […] can be cognitive as well […] ultimately renders Suvin's definition useless […] because "there is no way to tell them apart" (Spiegler 383). I would not go so far as claiming it is useless but rather add to it the clear distinction made when one speaks of the notion of elaborating on the impossible within the story world in order to enhance plausibility, either by extrapolating on scientific knowledge with the use of the imagination or rooting it in pre-existing scientific knowledge of the day. Harry Potter's magic wand is thus *not* a SF trope but an inexplicable part of a world that just is and needs no explanations. Suvin also says, "SF is thus a metaempirical and non-naturalistic, that is, an estranged, literary genre which is not at the same time metaphysical" (Suvin 20) and makes this same distinction around many texts but not some that others do. The story world of SF must be cognitively validated through some pre-existing knowledge of the reader and made probable by explanation of some sorts. George Mann speaks of this and says that SF is "concerned with the *process* by which a depicted environment has become different […] or with the *means* by which humanity finds itself there" (Mann 5, author's italics).

While most agree that this is what separates SF from other form of fantastic literature there are those who emphasize different aspects of SF literary features. Brian Aldiss' definition is thus, SF "is the search for a definition of mankind and his status in the universe which will stand in our advanced but confused state of knowledge (science) and is characteristically cast in a Gothic or post-Gothic mode," adding that SF is "[h]ubris clobbered by nemesis" (cited in Cuddon 791). This definition certainly does not include much of the literature that goes under the name of SF today and is mostly escapist in form but this kind of definition explains much of what the literature is about in essence; the existential search of questions regarding the contemporary human

condition and has been called the *real* SF by many proponents of the genre. Other definitions are much broader in scope and attempt to include all types of SF. George Mann's "loose description" of SF is as follows:

> SF is a form of fantastic literature that attempts to portray, in rational and realistic terms, future times and environments that are different from our own. It will nevertheless show an awareness of the concerns of the times in which it is written and provide implicit commentary on contemporary society, exploring the effects, material and psychological, that any new technologies may have upon it. Any further changes that take place in this society, as well as any extrapolated future events or occurrences, will have their basis in measured and considered theory, scientific or otherwise. SF authors will use their strange and imaginative environments as a testing ground for new ideas, considering in full the implications of any notion they propose (Mann 6).

Mann says that SF tries "to examine the wider picture" and excludes from SF the related genres of Space Opera and Science Fantasy because "they do not bother to make plausible their invented futures" (Mann 5).

By using such a broad definition one can identify most characteristics of the genre. However, at the same time a definition such as this excludes many works as well; like *Star Wars* and *Star Trek*. Nevertheless, the most important thing is the difference between "our own" world and the one being described and made plausible by scientific extrapolations.

If one takes a look at George Lucas's *Star Wars* one cannot find such plausibility because the world depicted is so far removed from the actual world and the story is less concerned with technological or futuristic extrapolations and focuses rather on the spectacle and action. Suvin argues that a text like the space-opera "mimic[s] SF scenery but [is] modeled on the structures of the Western and other avatars of fairy tale and fantasy" and describes such texts as either "inferior SF [or] non-SF" (Suvin 29).

Indeed, *Star Wars* does not contemplate contemporary society as such, nor does it concern itself with existential questions about the human condition or seek to define mankind and its place in the world. The story is much closer to the myth; the heroic myth which can be found in action/adventures. However, *Star Wars* is certainly included in the genre of SF, most often in the sub-genre of space-opera, because it pits technology against humanity in a way that early SF did when anxieties about technology where becoming apparent, especially in the traditional opposition between good and evil. There is a deep divide between Tevis's *The Man Who Fell to Earth* and *Star Wars*, but they have both been classified the same, despite their gross syntactic differences. As Suvin notes, "SF worlds offer no assurances as to the outcome of their protagonists' endeavors" (Suvin 19). This can hardly be true about space opera's like *Star Wars*, which rely heavily on the heroic myth, which is very clear in its outcome, as is the tragic myth. However, in most people's minds *Star Wars* is SF. Its semantics are SF, its syntax something else. It is a story of good versus evil and exploits so many different kind of genre tropes that it becomes almost impossible to categorize it with any accuracy; the Force is fantasy, the light-saber and other technological elements are SF, Yoda and the Ewoks are fairy-tale, and, to use Rick Altman's phrase, its "meaning-

bearing structures" (Altman 11) are taken from genres like the myth, the western and the romance.

It becomes apparent when studying the phenomenon which is SF that it is very important to establish a distinction between the fantasy, the myth, and the fairy-tale on one hand, and SF on the other. However, equally important, and perhaps a road less travelled, is making the same distinction between SF and other subgenres as Space-Opera, or Science-Fantasy, which on closer examination is as equally far removed from real SF as other fantastical literature is. This will not be attempted further here, but suffice to say that the formation of SF sub-genres have become equally important in the last few decades as was the case with SF in the early 20th century and the problem of how to distinguish between them is yet another hurdle SF has to face so that not all texts be included under the enormous umbrella of SF.

Is The Man Who Fell to Earth a SF Novel?

In the novel Bryce, a scientist who suspects Newton of not being human, ponders to himself whether or not the great man does indeed come from another planet. He is certainly influenced by the cultural stereotype of what an alien should be when he smiles to himself "at the cheap, science-fiction level of his own private discourse" (Tevis 76), because Bryce dismisses those feelings on the account of assumptions rooted in those stereotypes. He assumes, logically though, that an alien from another planet would not drink alcoholic and certainly not gin at that, and that an alien would not require a space-ship, for in order to land on earth that alien would already be in possession of such a craft. However logical those assumptions may be Bryce does not factor in contingencies such as that the space-craft could have been damaged en route and that an alien might like to consume alcoholic beverages. This is in essence the fate

of SF within most cultures, an assumption is made that a particular story or film is SF because it has an alien from outer space as a character, interstellar space-travel or some piece of advanced technology in its midst. The mixing of genre is of course very common; films such as *Blade Runner* (1982) blend SF with the detective story and adjust their *mise-en-scéne* to highlight this fact. *Cowboys and Aliens* (2011) does the same with the Western. These films are however at heart more SF than Western or detective stories (despite their obvious frontierism) because they only use tropes from these genres respectively without altering the SF structure upon which they are constructed. John Frow points out it is "genre [that] guides interpretation because it is a constraint on semiosis […] it specifies which types of meaning are relevant and appropriate in a particular context" (Frow 101). So, in generic hybrids such as those mentioned above, the more powerful structure should prevail.

Assumptions like Bryce's are the kinds we make more easily in the field of SF when it comes to identifying and classifying. Roberts speaks of how distinctly SF is recognized from other genres by way of "a fairly narrow range of stock themes and situation," that include aliens, interstellar space-travel and radically different future periods of time (Roberts 14). After this labeling there is a common tendency of many to scoop all SF under the same hat, and, as Kelly and Kessell note, that hat has been highly influenced "in the popular mind with explosions, special effects, aliens, and adventure stories" through films of the 1990s especially (Kelly 7). As a result, the hard work of serious SF writers from the 1950s to the 1970s is either dismissed as bad literature or with nothing important to say. The bigotry towards SF is rooted in the fact the movie industry spouted out dismal material, plus the fact that in its early days SF literature was

not as concerned with the craft of writing good prose, but rather the spectacle and awe it could produce.

As noted earlier, the novel in question comes at a time when serious SF writing was on the increase. *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (Tevis' second novel after *The Hustler*) is certainly one of the SF works that was marketed as "serious" literature. There is little doubt that he uses SF features to get his point across, however subtly. So, what are these features that one can point to and assert that the novel is SF? There are basically three points of difference; the future setting, the introduction of an alien, and the technology he brings with him, i.e. the interstellar space-craft and futuristic inventions Newton markets on earth to amass his fortune.

In terms of difference the future in which the story is set are only very slight alterations from the era in which the story is written. It is not like most SF; it is set some twenty years in the future and there are no new technological inventions in that world, it is much the same as the reader knows it to be. To emphasize the fact that Tevis' main concerns are rooted in contemporary society, Bryce walks into a bar, a juke-box is playing, the room filled with bearded country-boys, "most of them signing disarmament petitions [and] discussing socialism" (Tevis 29). What Tevis does is extrapolate on what the future holds in terms of political evolution, not technological. His futuristic world includes a "Cuban block" that has sent an unmanned space-craft into orbit (Tevis 75), resonating the atmosphere of what was happening in world affairs during the time he wrote the novel, i.e. the Cuban missile crises and strained relations between the Soviets and Americans. There is also the mention of unrest in Africa; rioting that has lasted "ever since the early sixties," the difference here being that there are talks from an African politician of using "tactical hydrogen weapons" to calm the unrest down (Tevis

26), implying that some African nations have such weaponry. In fact, as Newton comments to Bryce, "[t]here are nine nations with hydrogen weapons; at least twelve with bacteriological ones" and then asks Bryce, rather sarcastically, whether he thinks these will not be used (Tevis 93). This would be a realistic account of future development of nuclear capability. This is the world into which Newton falls. Tevis is not in the least concerned with how advances in technology or science will alter our world; his main focus is on contemporary society and how mankind will prove itself holding the reign of a power so great that it can ultimately destroy the earth. The central question revolves around how humanity will change, not how humanity will change the outlook of the world, as is the case with most SF novels. Brooks Landon says, "all SF is preparation" in the sense that you can and should prepare for the changes the future brings (Landon xii), and in many cases this is true; SF predicts and speculates on scientific and technological changes, but more importantly the human condition when faced with real decisions about its own future in the world. Tevis draws out these speculations through Newton, the extraterrestrial, who is both the bearer of Cassandra-like predictions and of hope. His prophecy, that humans will in a short period of time annihilate all life on earth, is the mirror to anxieties felt by most in the sixties. Arthur B. Evans points out that "*Frankenstein* expressed the fears of an entire […] generation caught in the sudden paradigm shift between tradition and modernity" (Bould 13). This is very similar to what Tevis expresses in his novel; the tradition is war and the modernity of war is the nuclear bomb. At one point Newton tells Bryce, "we [Antheans] are certain beyond all reasonable doubt that your world will be an atomic rubble heap in no more than thirty years, if you are left to yourselves" (Tevis 152). H. Bruce Franklin accurately notes in *Strange Scenarios: Science Fiction, the Theory of Alienation, and*

the Nuclear Gods, that it "was SF that created the first strange scenarios in which human creativity transmuted itself into alien powers capable of destroying the entire human species" (Franklin 117). SF is, however, equally concerned with progress in a more benevolent light, making the future more efficient and streamlined, so to speak; utopian in some cases. Although not a part of the story world, but only confined to the imagination of Newton, there are such speculations in the novel. Newton describes how his race would come to earth, establish themselves in key positions of influence, introduce new technology, leveling the playing field of warring nations by providing weapons to one and defenses to those weapons to the other. The result of this would be a more stable and better society, however, only "as long as we [Antheans] keep our devices and our knowledge under our control" as Newton says (Tevis 145). This stipulation is of course what indicates Anthean control of earth, a fact Newton contradicts when he says to Bryce "we have no intention of ruling you, even if we could" (Tevis 146). The irony here is that this comes from a *man* whose race is the sole survivor "after five wars fought with radioactive weapons" (Tevis 145). Much like Woody Allen's theme in his film *Bananas* (1971), Tevis is saying that political change for the sake of change, changes nothing, despite good intentions.

New scientific and technological changes in the story-world are few and far apart. Tevis gives the reader no indications that the year 1985 offers any radical differences when it comes to gadgets of any kind, nor are there any scientific extrapolations. The world is basically the same after roughly twenty years of technical evolution. It is not until Newton starts to manufacture products based on new technologies that this comes into play in the novel. This feature only serves the story by explaining how Newton is able to amass a great fortune in a short period of time and

also to arouse Bryces' scientific curiosity, which eventually leads him to Newton and the discovery of his true Anthean identity. There's no function for these gadgets; there are no hover-cars, super-computers or robots in the story, simply because the story does not need any lavish or fantastic technological extrapolations. It strips itself of extravagant speculations and mentions only a few of Newton's inventions; the camera that does not need regular chemicals to develop its film and the balls that have music on them, much like CD's today. These are not predictions of the future, but rather a logical assumption that technological changes will occur within the field of photography and stereo equipment. This is however very much a part of what SF does and has always done; speculations on what the future has in store in terms of technological advancement, and is exclusively the domain of SF in literature. The emphasis on this SF feature is however not in accordance with the genre's regular employment of technologically and scientifically altered worlds. Newton's inventions do not serve as a world altering phenomena but rather reaffirm the claim made in the beginning of the novel that Newton is indeed an alien from another planet and becomes a way for him to make the necessary funds to complete his mission, and ultimately a way out of prison for him since the inventions have gained him considerable cloud and influence as the head of World Enterprises Inc. The technology introduced is not extraordinary in any way and could well be human and do not need further explanations within the story; they are mundane and ordinary in nature and serve the story in a very limited way.

The most identifiable SF feature of the story is certainly Newton, the alien from another planet. Roberts notes that SF's "obsession with alien encounter, which has spilled out into culture in the last decade or so, is the key trope" (Roberts 183). At the time the novel was written there was also a great deal of emphasis placed on the alien

encounter; the space-race between the Soviets and USA was at a highpoint which proliferated this kind of speculation because mankind was conquering outer-space. This trope was a part of SF long before Gernsback coined the phrase. The rational in the earliest attempts was that the sentient alien must be made in man's image, since God made man in his own image and this is the tradition that Tevis follows, although he finds a way to reject "this peculiar set of premises and promises called religion" as Newton observes (Tevis 59). The differences Newton, the alien, exhibits are biological; he looks a little different that the average man. He's taller, slender, with "skin almost translucent [and] hairless" (Tevis 7). He weighs very little because his bone structure is lighter as a result of gravitational difference; in addition, he can see X-rays and his senses are slightly different to that of humans. These scientific extrapolations are subtle and not intended to play a major role within the story. Tevis almost downplays his alien's features from the beginning, making him appear more human than most humans. His emphasis is on the question of what kind of sentient being Newton is; what he feels and how he views human culture. Tevis does not focus on any special gifts that the alien might possess, nor does he bless Newton with any other-worldly powers, as is so common within SF; the most special thing about Newton becomes the fact that he's almost human, both in appearance and thought. Because of different gravitational pull Antheans have developed different biological structures, however, are sentient much the same way as humans, for gravitation does not affect consciousness.

Tevis starts the novel by introducing Newton, the largest *novum* within the novel. This process is confusing; the reader is made aware that Newton is from another planet, however, Newton is made to appear more human than alien. "He was not a man; yet he was very much like a man" (Tevis 6), and after a short description of his alien

features Tevis continues to say, “He was human; but not, properly, a man. Also, manlike, he was susceptible to love, to fear, to intense physical pain and to self-pity” (Tevis 7). Newton is not the traditional alien, he possesses no special powers, nor does he have with him any new and amazing technological equipment. He is basically so much like a man that in the reader’s mind he becomes a man, a perception that not only remains but increases as the novel progresses while Newton gradually becomes a human being. The title of the novel foreshadows this; the *man* who fell to earth, not the alien, is an apt description because Newton, who is only slightly different than a human in the beginning, becomes even more human as the story develops.

This alien is not hostile, but rather seeks to establish a friendly coexistence with humans. The alien subjective point of view within the narrative is essentially the predominant one and Tevis makes sure that the reader identifies with Newton’s experience of alienation, although the narrative shifts to Bryce and Betty Jo occasionally. The alien’s difference is not the focus but rather the alien’s similarities to humans. Newton is placed in the novel as an outsider so that the reader can identify himself within the alien’s point of view; the reader must see the human condition from the outside in order to get the right perspective of what the problem is, or can become in this case. Newton is not out trying to destroy or kill, he simply wants to save lives and help humans make earth a better place. The story is philosophical in nature because the alien brings up existential questions about human nature and ponders them throughout the novel, taking the reader on a journey with Newton to contemplate what it means to be human and what it can mean in terms of the future. Tevis does not predict a future but rather presents a completely neutral future in which the possibility of change is hypothesized through Newton’s convictions about human nature; nothing is realized but

open-ended questions are there for the reader to mull over and ultimately answer for him or herself. Is the human race capable of maintaining itself or is man inevitably going to make earth "an atomic rubble heap" as Newton remarks? These speculations are aimed at contemporary society. The nuclear threat and how that threat can be reduced. Stableford notes that "literary use of aliens outside genre science fiction was, inevitably, dominated by philosophical fabulations constructing hypothetical alien viewpoints in order to examine and criticise human attitudes, values, and ambitions" (Stableford 15). There is little room for doubt that Tevis' novel does exactly this; it contemplates and examines the human condition through the alien and criticizes it from all angles, without stripping humanity of its hope.

Darko Suvin claims that "aliens […] are a mirror to man just as the differing country is a mirror for his world" and continues to say that SF "has always been wedded to a hope of finding in the unknown the ideal environment, tribe, state, intelligence or other aspect of the Supreme Good (or to a fear of and revulsion from the contrary)" (Suvin 374). Anthea is analogous to earth and the possible destiny of man is embedded in Newton's character. He displays what mankind can accomplish and also what Tevis thinks it has become; apathetic to its own destiny. In his own quest of establishing a text's science fictional validity Suvin uses as his premise "that SF is distinguished by the narrative dominance […] of a fictional novum (novelty, innovation) validated by the cognitive logic" and asks "[w]hat is the common denominator the presence of which is logically necessary and which has to be hegemonic in a narration in order that we may call it a SF narration?" (Suvin 63). In answering this Suvin sees the *novum* as the crucible; in regards to Tevis' novel, this would be the future setting and Newton, the alien. However, one must factor in their necessity and magnitude, as Roberts notes:

> It seems that one of the axes of critical enquiry has to do with the degree of proximity of the difference of SF to the world we live in: too removed and the SF text loses purchase, or becomes merely escapist; too close and it might as well be a conventional novel, it loses force and penetration the novum can possess when it comes to providing newness of perspective (Roberts 16).

Although Roberts does not go so far as to exclude texts that go to either extreme, I would perhaps add that possibility to his statement, for there is quite a distance between texts carrying the SF label. Regarding this novel, it has already been established that there are basically three distinct point of difference, the future, the alien, and the technical gadgets he produces. The dominance of the future setting within the novel and its degree of difference is very low; it is almost as though Tevis wants the reader to remain in his epoch and not realize that he has been transported into a near future. For instance, the news of unrest in Africa come via a newsreel in a cinema before the movie begins, demonstrating that Tevis has no intention of extrapolating future developments within the culture; the same being true about the above mentioned bar scene. It becomes very clear right from the start that the novel is never about the future, as is the case with most SF, but rather a commentary about its own epoch. The necessity of the future setting is not clear. Whether the novel could have been placed in a contemporaneous setting is difficult to say, but since the future setting is not a dominant factor in the narrative it seems it would not have had much effect. The story world and the world in which the story is written are almost identical, and Tevis makes no attempts to distract the reader from that fact. It may well be argued that in terms of this future, it is a conventional novel. However, much of the novel's force is inherent in the fact that it does not make the future radically different from the present. Add to this the factor of

angst with which Tevis plays, the combination of dread and hope, which is embedded in his future setting. As Stableford says, "[h]uman experience of existence is fundamentally and necessarily afflicted by dread occasioned by the awareness that the future is undetermined" (Stableford 44), and this is what Tevis brings out with his future setting, feelings of apprehension and hope. The magnitude of this *novum* is then by all accounts minimal, it does not dominate the narrative. However, its importance is great and could be argued, essential in terms of what feelings Tevis is trying to arouse within the reader.

Suvin notes that "the novelty in SF can be either a new locus [the future setting in this case], or an agent (character) with new powers transforming the old locus, or a blend of both" (Suvin 79). This story is clearly the hybrid version, although the future is a subtle one. Contrary to the future setting, Newton's impact on the story is absolute. He is in fact the story's protagonist and antagonist and does not resemble the classic SF aliens that have come before and after him. His degree of proximity to humans is very high, so much so that when examined by the authorities he claims to be a mutated Kentuckian; an explanation that seems reasonable to Newton. Like the future *novum* Newton is very close to a conventional character but there's no escaping the fact that he is an alien and as such he is the most dominating presence within the narrative. As far as SF is concerned Tevis seems to make attempts at distancing this character from all conventions and place Newton within the realm of myth and fairy-tale. The first section of the book, titled *Icarus Descending*, is a clear reference to the myth and indicates Newton's hubris towards mankind. The novel's analogy to this myth is followed throughout and ends in tragedy, i.e.with Icarus drowning. At one point in the novel Newton refers to himself as Rumplestiltskin, "that evil dwarf that came from nowhere

[…] to save the princess's life with unheard-of knowledge" (Tevis 107). There is little doubt that Newton's person derives not from SF, but rather from myth and fairy-tale. This does, however, not diminish the importance of his alien identity and the necessity of him being of alien origin. If, for instance, the character would have been a mutated Kentuckian the story would lose all its impact and become something completely different. This essay's question regarding the novel hinges upon his extraterrestrial identity and the importance this holds for the story.

Conclusion

The largest issue in my mind regarding the genre of SF is the fact that it has become too big, too loaded a term to be of much use, almost to the point of becoming meaningless. Every Tom, Dick and Harry has their own definition of what the term entails and in the public's mind, minute intertextual relations between texts is enough to pigeonhole otherwise unrelated texts into the umbrella-term of SF. This problem will perhaps never be solved but there are signs that this could be remedied to some extent; the formation of SF sub-genres is a step in the right direction. It seems pointless to place Tevis' novel in the same category as Heinlein's *Starship Troopers* (1959), for their structural differences are so great. That particular novel is better placed in the sub-genre of Military SF, as is the above mentioned *Cowboys and Aliens*, because their emphasis are on the battle of two forces, and both military history and conduct. SF has simply become a vacuum genre that sucks up such a variety of texts that the term is liable to lose its significance. In my view, real SF peaked during the New Wave; it reached its highest aspirations and texts that hold true that kind of structure are in my mind worthy of the SF label. The escapist forms, such as *Star Wars*, that take the adventure and spectacle as their goals, should be placed in sub-genres like Space-Opera. This is

certainly not an easy task, I admit, but with further dialogue and awareness in our culture this can gradually be realized. When a movie comes out, like *Avatar* (2009), for instance, instead of stamping it with SF, it would be wise to immediately label it as Space-Opera or whatever is appropriate.

Having said this, I maintain that if SF is still a term to be used without further refinement, then Tevis' novel is without question the most real and true SF novels ever written. In my mind it represents all that is both good and true about SF, and indeed worthy of that stamp. It holds in high regard the reason the genre came into being in the first place, reflecting as it does on the human condition in face of technological and scientific developments. It is certainly subtle in it uses of SF tropes in comparison to other SF novels, but rather than diminishing its force it increases it. The story is simple, tragic, and ultimately about its own time, not the future and can never be called escapist. Tevis uses myth, fantasy and fairy-tale elements from other genres and then builds a structure that is unquestionably SF at heart. By Suvin's criteria the novel holds up as SF, by both Mann's and Aldiss' definitions it runs almost parallel. Stating that it is SF because of its future setting and alien encounter is not enough; this is essentially the assumption previously talked about and condemned. One must take a closer look at what the story is telling us to reach a satisfying conclusion to the questions posed. The fact that the story can be read on multiple levels, such as a Christian fable or Cold-War parable, does not change the fact that its surface meaning is deeply rooted in the tradition of SF, with close affiliations to *Frankenstein* and other predecessors of SF. Although one can make the case that history has caught up with the novel's political and technological extrapolations (e.g. nuclear development and 3-D TV) the character of

Newton remains and until one finds him/herself faced with alien encounter this novel will rank among the Classics in the strictly defined literary corpus of SF.

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