

ISSU9Sf – Aliens and Earthlings: Science Fiction Literature

Module description

“I have been a soreheaded occupant of a file drawer labeled "science fiction" ... and I would like out, particularly since so many serious critics regularly mistake the drawer for a urinal” – Kurt Vonnegut.

The ‘low’ status ascribed to Science Fiction by literary critics in the twentieth-century overlooks the genre’s keen ability to narrate social change. Fears of extraterrestrial invasion and nuclear apocalypse, of seemingly strange and alien civilizations, and of social, economic and cultural collapse bely SF’s trash label. This course aims to introduce to students the genre’s deep philosophical dimensions, tracing its progress through the short story and pulp mediums during the inter-war years in the United States and United Kingdom, and its later development across both sides of the so-called Iron Curtain during the Cold War. The Science Fiction genre’s ability to narrate and fuel wartime paranoia on the one hand, and to deconstruct ideologies about cultural and national identities in opposing Eastern and Western political blocs on the other, will be explored in this course.

Furthermore, if Science Fiction was a genre from which Vonnegut wanted an escape, what would the literature he might retreat into look like? In consideration of his statement, this course will also challenge the traditional conventions of Science Fiction – interstellar conflict with alien races – and explore the genre’s diverse progressions: into ecocriticism, feminism, sexuality, and the near-future ‘Post-SF’ of the urban and suburban present. Secondary texts examining the range of theoretical definitions of Science Fiction, as well as its study in environmental studies, gender studies, queer theory and Postmodernism, will accompany the primary literature on this course.

Module outline

This course provides a taught introduction to a range of literary progressions of Science Fiction. You will study a diverse array of SF novels and short stories which explore social issues of global conflict, national identity, gender, sexuality and the natural and human-built environments of the contemporary era. Through a series of twice-weekly lectures and seminars, you will engage in discussion of these themes in primary and secondary texts with your peers. You will gain knowledge of the literary theories and cultural developments of Science Fiction, and have opportunities in class to explore and share your insights in conversation. An assessed, ten-minute group presentation in the final week of class on one of the primary texts on the reading list will enable you to demonstrate your understanding of the issues covered in this course. You will also create a final academic piece of work in the form of a 1500-word essay, which will demonstrate the core transferrable academic skills of the cognition and communication of a coherent argument. You will be supported by seminars that focus on developing good scholarly and social skills alongside an understanding of the course materials.

Learning outcomes

The module will help develop written and oral communication skills through written coursework and tutorial participation. By the end of this course, students will be able to:

1. Demonstrate an understanding of the key theoretical concepts of estrangement and cognition, genre system, speculative fiction, and how they pertain to the evolution of SF throughout the twentieth century, and into the twenty-first century.
2. Recognise, analyse, discuss and reflect upon the diverse nations, political eras, and socio-cultural, philosophical, and critical theories which SF relates to.
3. Apply the skills of sustained oral and written argumentation in a coherent and persuasive fashion.
4. Work with others in the presentation of ideas and the process of collective problem solving.

Proposed teaching schedule

Two one-hour lectures and two one-hour interactive seminars per week.

Week one

***Lecture 1: Introduction, course and assessment overview.** 'What is SF? Some Thoughts on Genre', John Reider.

* **Seminar 1: SF and Horror.** 'Within the Walls of Eryx', H.P Lovecraft and Kenneth Sterling. Analysis and discussion.

***Lecture 2: SF and War.** *War of the Worlds*, H.G Wells.

***Seminar 2:** Discussion exploring key themes of Wells' Anti-Utopias.

* Week two

* **Lecture 3: SF and Anti-War.** *Slaughterhouse 5*, Kurt Vonnegut.

* **Seminar 3:** Introduction to the novel's Cold War-era resonance and discussion of its key themes.

* **Lecture 4: Soviet SF.** *Roadside Picnic*, Arkady and Boris Strugatsky.

* **Seminar 4:** Discussion of *Roadside Picnic* as post-disaster SF.

* Week three

* **Lecture 5: Speculative Fiction and Gender.** *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Ursula K. Le Guin.

* **Seminar 5:** Introduction to SF and gender, discussion of the novel.

* **Lecture 6: LGBTQ SF.** Introduction to Queer Theory and its exploration in key primary texts.

* **Seminar 6:** Discussion of Queer themes in *The Left Hand of Darkness*.

* Week four

* **Lecture 7: Post-SF.** *The Wasp Factory*, Iain Banks

* **Seminar 7:** Discussion of the novel as Post SF.

* **Seminar 8:** Group Presentations.

* **Seminar 9:** Class reflection on course, essay-writing workshop.

Assessment: Assessment will be based on an in-class presentation on a text on the course (worth 50%) and an essay (worth 50%). The essay will be based on at least one of the primary texts studied on the course, with the potential for comparison with another, relevant primary text of your own choice (to be agreed upon by the convener). Students are expected to draw on theoretical and critical insights gained during the module.

Suggested field trips: To see the latest Sci-Fi movie (tba) in the IMAX cinema at the Glasgow Science Centre.