

1 ♦ Science Fiction and the Unusual

Science fiction can always be counted on to contain the unusual—new life-forms, other planets, future eras. Science-fiction fans always enjoy reading and thinking about these strange, scary, and incredible things.

Science-fiction stories are not usually set in the “familiar” world of today. By setting a story in another place or time, or merely altering our own world, an author can create a society that is different from what we know. This society might be totally different, or different in only one small way. The author steps back from the world we live in and looks at it as an outsider might. And that, of course, is what the author hopes you will do as well. This technique is called *distancing*. Through distancing you are able to escape your own narrow world and look at things from a new viewpoint.

Readers are encouraged to compare the world of the story with the world we actually live in and see the similarities as well as the differences. Is the author’s imaginary world better than our own? If so, how might we make our own world better? Is the author’s imaginary world a wasteland? If it is, what can we do to make sure our own world doesn’t end up the same way?

Take a look at the world of the future that Ray Bradbury has created in “A Sound of Thunder.” What is unusual about it? What comparisons with our own world might this story lead you to make?

Eckels glanced across the vast office at a mass and tangle . . . of wires and steel boxes, at an aurora that flickered now orange, now silver, now blue. . . .

“A real Time Machine.” He shook his head. “Makes you think. If the election had gone badly yesterday, I might be here now running away from the results. Thank God Keith won. He’ll make a fine President of the United States.”

The most unusual element of the world that Bradbury has created is the Time Machine. There is no such thing, of course, as a machine that takes people back in time. Yet it is fascinating to think about time travel. What might one find? What might happen if a time traveler stepped into the past?

A familiar element of this imaginary world is the presidential election. We can assume that in the year 2055 the President of the

1. How does the author "distance" the reader from the world of the story? Explain your answer.
2. The author refers to Christ, Moses, Alexander, Caesar, Napoleon, and Hitler. Why does he refer to these men? What do they have in common?

The Machine slowed; its scream fell to a murmur. The Machine stopped.
 The sun stopped in the sky.
 The fog that had enveloped the Machine blew away and they were in an old time, a very old time indeed, three hunters and two Safari Heads with their blue metal guns across their knees.
 "Christ isn't born yet," said Travis. "Moses has not gone to the mountain to talk with God. The Pyramids are still in the earth, waiting to be cut out and put up. Remember that. Alexander, Napoleon, Hitler—none of them exists."
 The men nodded.
 "That"—Mr. Travis pointed—"is the jungle of sixty million two thousand and fifty-five years before President Keith."

Read the following passage and answer the questions about it using what you have learned in this part of the lesson. Use your writing notebook or a separate piece of paper for your answers.

1 ♦ Exercise A

United States is still elected by the people. But this election contained a danger yet unknown to us. One of the candidates was a tyrant, a possible dictator.
 Right at the outset, then, the author has distanced us from the world of the story. It is not the world we know—it is an imaginary world of the future. Bradbury also leads us to compare the world of today with the world of the story. This comparison forces us to think about the importance of leadership in our lives. We are able to imagine the disastrous and frightening results of being governed by a tyrant.

2 ♦ Science Fiction and Science

Every good science-fiction story contains a kernel of science. The story itself may be wildly improbable, but it must be backed up by a believable scientific theory.

There are two reasons for this “rule.” The most obvious one, of course, is that without an element of science it can’t be science fiction. But there’s a more important reason: If the author includes something that you know to be true, then you are more inclined to go along with the rest of the story.

For example, the average reader would be insulted by a story in which a giant monster rises out of the sea and devours a city. But suppose the reader is first reminded that radiation can cause animal cells to mutate, or change—even grow. Then suppose the story involves a nuclear explosion under water, something we know has actually occurred. With these two facts in mind, you might be willing to concede that it could be possible that a giant monster was created as a result of atomic radiation. Then you could possibly imagine the giant creature rising out of the sea and swallowing up San Francisco. So you put aside the belief that the occurrence is next to impossible, and you are able to enjoy the story.

Science-fiction writers must be careful about the accuracy of the scientific facts included in their stories. If there is a glaring error in the scientific information, then it is impossible to believe the rest of the story. For instance, take the idea of time travel that is presented in “A Sound of Thunder.” If the characters in the story had traveled back in time sixty million years and met John F. Kennedy, you probably would have stopped reading. You may be willing to accept the possibility of time travel, but there is a definite limit. On the other hand, to go back sixty million years and meet a dinosaur, you might say to yourself, “Sure, why not?” and continue reading.

Another element of science can be found in the following passage from the story. What theory do you find here that is generally believed to be true? What effect does this theory have on the rest of the story?

“A Time Machine is damn finicky business. Not knowing it, we might kill an important animal, a small bird, a roach, a flower even, thus destroying an important link in a growing species.”

1. A scientific fact or procedure is present in each of the two passages. What are they?
2. Do these passages make the story more believable? Why or why not? Support your answer.

"Can these guns get a dinosaur cold?" Eckels felt his mouth saying.
"If you hit them right," said Travis on the helmet radio. "Some dinosaurs have two brains, one in the head, another far down the spinal column. We stay away from those. That's stretching luck. Put your first shots into the eyes, if you can, blind them, and go back into the brain."

Passage B

"This Machine, this Path, your clothing and bodies, were sterilized, as you know, before the journey. We wear these oxygen helmets so we can't introduce our bacteria into an ancient atmosphere."

[Travis instructs the hunters before they leave the time machine.]

Passage A

Read the following passages and answer the questions about them using what you have learned in this part of the lesson. Use your writing notebook or a separate piece of paper for your answers.

2 ♦ Exercise B

Most people accept or are aware of the scientific theory of evolution. This theory says that life on earth developed slowly over millions of years, with each small change leading to other changes. That is what Travis is talking about in that passage. But if you interrupt this chain of life, then the link you have removed could cause an entirely different series of events. And that, of course, is exactly what happens when Eckels steps off the path and crushes a butterfly. The butterfly was a link in the evolutionary chain. If you accept the idea of evolution, you will not find it hard to believe that this one minor mishap could have devastating consequences.

3 ♦ Science Fiction and Society

Most science fiction contains a lesson or an opinion about modern society. This sort of “statement” is usually implied, not stated outright. It is *suggested* in the message of the story. That is why science-fiction writers always use ideas that are familiar when inventing new creatures or planets. When you think about their creations, chances are they will remind you of someone or some place you already know. At this point, you are able to understand the author’s implied message because you can relate to it.

In “A Sound of Thunder” Ray Bradbury comments on the kind of leaders a society chooses. You can best understand his message if you know something about history. The story was written in 1952, not long after World War II. The brutal reign of Adolf Hitler in Germany was still fresh in people’s minds.

In the following passage, a minor character in the story describes two candidates for President of the United States in the year 2055. What kind of leader would each make? Which of these candidates do you think the author would have voted for?

“Thank God Keith won,” [said Eckels.] “He’ll make a fine President of the United States.”

“Yes,” said the man behind the desk. “We’re lucky. If Deutscher had gotten in, we’d have the worst kind of dictatorship. There’s an anti-everything man for you, a militarist, anti-Christ, anti-human, anti-intellectual. People called us up, you know, joking but not joking. Said if Deutscher became President they wanted to go live in 1492.”

The candidate named Keith sounds honest and trustworthy. He’s undoubtedly the one the author would have voted for. But the other, Deutscher, is described as “anti-everything,” a tyrant interested only in his own wants and ready to wage war against those who challenge him. It’s no coincidence, considering when the story was written, that this candidate has a German-sounding name— Deutscher. The author wanted readers to connect Deutscher with Hitler.

The author’s attitude is clear. Leaders like Deutscher and Hitler are a threat to peace and progress. The author suggests that even minor changes in society could result in completely different kinds of leaders—

1. Select an item from your list and think of what message you would want to tell your readers. For example, if you chose virtual reality, Look at the list you have written for Create Your Own Science-Fiction Story on page 359 that tells you about your own story idea. Now do the following:

3 ♦ Writing on Your Own

Now check your answers using the suggestions in the Answer Key starting on page 457. Review this part of the lesson if you don't understand why an answer was wrong.

2. What is the author's implied message concerning scientific progress?

1. What is Travis' main concern in this passage? Do you agree or disagree with his concerns? Why?

["Travis says,] "Maybe Time *can't* be changed by us. Or maybe it can be changed only in little subtle ways. . . . Who knows? Who really can say he knows? We don't know. We're guessing. But until we do know for certain whether our messing around in Time *can* make a big roar or a little rustle in history, we're being damned careful."

Read the following passage and answer the questions about it using what you have learned in this part of the lesson. Use your writing notebook or a separate piece of paper for your answers.

3 ♦ Exercise C

leaders associated with social unrest. This is the implied message about society that Bradbury makes in "A Sound of Thunder." Science fiction may convey other kinds of messages also. An author may comment on a new scientific discovery by predicting how that discovery could be misused in the future. In Exercise C, Bradbury issues a sober warning. See if you can figure out what kind of statement he is making in this passage.