Creating a Medium for Exploring the Implications of Science: Edgar Allan Poe and the First Science Fiction

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Science fiction has emerged as one of our culture’s means of carrying on a broader conversation about the direction of both science and technology. It asks the questions of unintended consequences and what might be the long-term outcome of applied science. One of the first writers to develop this new genre was Edgar Allan Poe. In fact, it is in his writings that we find the first examples of many of the plots that still embody science fiction today.

Science fiction enjoys a status today that was unthinkable one hundred years ago. It is one of our culture’s most popular forms of stories, and, for many people, their primary source of information about science. In order to raise the most pertinent questions about existence, science fiction taps into the fears and anxieties that people have about modern society and its direction. People with a materialist view of the world, such as H.G. Wells, have used science fiction to present their perspective on reality, and people with a Christian view of the world, such as C.S. Lewis, have used science fiction to present their perspective. Science fiction remains popular, however, because the audience becomes a participant in the discussion. Science fiction creates a venue for the exploration of the issues of existence, thus it has become the mythology of the modern world.

Western culture produced science fiction in the same way that it produced popular democracy and universal education. Every culture produces institutions and art that embody its core beliefs and values. One way to track the rate of change in a culture, and the extent to which a culture has abandoned old beliefs and values, is to take note of the introduction of new institutions and art forms. Science fiction suddenly appeared as a new art form in the early nineteenth century. It would not have a name until a century later, long after it had become accepted as one of the culture’s most popular kinds of stories.

New art forms rarely appear in world history. Cultures have produced few ways of telling stories. For millennia, most cultures of the world expressed their core beliefs and values through the telling of adventure stories. Such stories glorify values such as courage, loyalty, and skill in fighting. They deplore traits such as treachery, cowardice, and fear. The Greeks modified the adventure story to create dramatic tragedy—not only a new kind of story, but a new way of telling a story. Instead of the lone storyteller or poet holding forth for hours in conjunction with a banquet, a company of actors presented the story to a vast civic audience. In counterpoint to the tragedy, the comedy appeared. Both tragedy and