

Alien Infertility in Science Fiction

Part III

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(See previous issues for parts I and II)

Conversely humans may impose infertility through contraception on alien species, and in *The Gripping Hand* (1993),¹ which is set in the *Motie* universe, humanity deliberately develops an intestinal fluke that permanently turns Moties into males, allowing Moties to control their population, as in their natural state, Moties are sequential hermaphrodites, changing from male to female, and must become regularly pregnant or die, and hence would overrun the cosmos if allowed out of their solar system. Humanity also similarly threatens the sentient and elephant-like 'Ganae' in Van Vogt's *Resurrection* (1948) with enforced infertility if the Ganae do not themselves limit their fertility.²



Interestingly, sex on Gene Brewer's planet in *K-Pax* (1995) is portrayed as painful, odorous and nauseating, and the sexual act is therefore solely procreative and not pleasurable.³ Naturally, overpopulation is not an issue on K-Pax.

Infertility has also been associated with ageing species, as a species' age is allegorically related to senescence, with all of the vicissitudes associated with extreme maturity, including infertility. Authors who portray such scenarios deliberately forget that such advanced races would be in possession of sophisticated reproductive aids and would surely be able to overcome such obstacles. In Stone's *Women with Wings* (1930), set in thirtieth century Earth, ninety-five percent of women entering childbirth suddenly start to die. The solutions proposed include racial sterilisation, creating humans in laboratories and stealing women from other planets. A solution is found by humanity's ability to procreate with Venusians (whose males are conveniently becoming sterile), resulting in health hybrids.⁴ Other examples include the 'Pei'an' race in Zelazny's *Isle of the Dead* (1969),⁵ and the 'Highbreed' race in the cartoon series *Ben Ten* episode *War of the Worlds: Part 2* (2009).⁶ Other famous aging species who are portrayed as having lost vitality and interest in life are the Martians in Wells's *The War*

¹ Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle *The Gripping Hand* (New York: Pocket Books, 1993).

² A. E. van Vogt, 'Resurrection', *Astounding Science Fiction*, August 1948.

³ Gene Brewer, *K-Pax* (New York: Saint Martin's Press, 1995).

⁴ Leslie F. Stone, 'Women with Wings', *Air Wonder Stories*, May 1930.

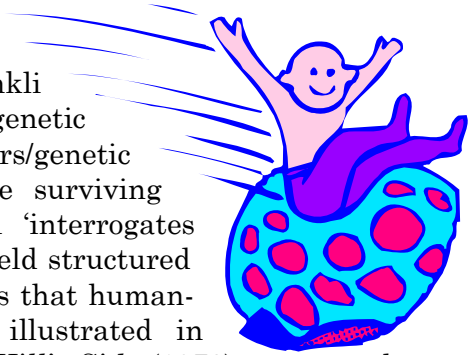
⁵ Roger Zelazny, *Isle of the Dead* (New York: Ace Books, 1969).

⁶ 'War of the Worlds: Part 2', Dwayne McDuffie, *Ben 10: Alien Force*, March 2009.

of the Worlds (1897),⁷ in Bradbury's *The Martian Chronicles* (1950),⁸ and in Simak's *Huddling Place* (1944).⁹

Alien individuals may decide to impose sterility on themselves, and in Bear's *Venging* (1975) an alien couple that is about to embark on a suicidal attack decide not to produce any more offspring,¹⁰ and in *The Light That Never Was* (1972) a humanoid race hounded by the majority of humans simply decide to stop having children and wait until their situation improves.¹¹ On a more profound note, in Hamilton's *The Naked God* (1999) a gestalt crystalline group mind evolved from an originally organic race decides not to produce any more new minds as having explored the entire universe, any progeny would only have a heritage and never any new discoveries.¹²

In Octavia Butler's *Dawn* (1988) the human race is shown at the brink of extinction after a nuclear war.¹³ The race is saved by a program of interbreeding with alien Oankli and thus redeemed humanity's transformation 'through genetic exchange with extra-terrestrial lovers/rescuers/destroyers/genetic engineers, who reform earth's habitats [...] and coerce surviving humans into intimate fusion with them'.¹⁴ This novel 'interrogates reproductive, linguistic, and nuclear politics in a mythic field structured by late twentieth-century race and gender'.¹⁵ The reality is that human-alien mating is well-nigh impossible, as graphically illustrated in Tiptree's *And I Awoke and Found Me Here on the Cold Hill's Side* (1973) where sexual relations with aliens are depicted as deviant and fetishistic by both of the involved races.¹⁶



Aliens have also been reproductively challenged by warfare, and in Harrison's *Invasion: Earth* (1982), two tropes are combined in two alien species, ex-combatants, who are portrayed as radiation damaged, with a decline in birth rate and an increased mutation in offspring.¹⁷ Similarly, the *Doctor Who* television episode *The Leisure Hive* (1980) also portrays an alien race rendered sterile by a war.¹⁸ Platt's *Doctor Who: Cat's Cradle, Time's Crucible* (1992) explains the absence of children on the Time Lords' home planet through a curse that managed to kill all unborn children and rendered the entire planet sterile.¹⁹

Aliens have also referred to themselves as barren since they lack paranormal powers, unlike humanity in Clarke's *Childhood's End* (1953),²⁰ underscoring Jameson's contention that Utopia is 'not some conceptual nugget we can extract and store away, with

⁷ Herbert George Wells, *The War of the Worlds* (London: Heinemann, 1898).

⁸ Ray Bradbury, *The Martian Chronicles* (New York: Bantam, 1950).

⁹ Clifford D. Simak, 'Huddling Place', *Astounding Science Fiction*, July 1944.

¹⁰ Greg Bear, 'The Venging', *Galaxy*, June 1976.

¹¹ Lloyd Biggle Jr., *The Light that Never Was* (London: New English Library, 1972).

¹² Peter F. Hamilton, *The Naked God* (London: Macmillan London Ltd, 1999).

¹³ Octavia Butler, *Dawn* (New York: Popular Library 1988).

¹⁴ Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, p. 180.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ The apt Keatsian quotation of the story's title is from the last stanza of 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci', representing aliens as the intoxicating yet indifferent Belle Dame while humanity is compared to the poem's palely-loitering knight. James Tiptree Jr, 'And I Awoke and Found Me Here on the Cold Hill's Side', in *10,000 Light Years from Home* (New York: Ace, 1973).

¹⁷ Harry Harrison, *Invasion: Earth* (East Rutherford: Ace, 1982).

¹⁸ 'The Leisure Hive', dir by Lovett Bickford, *Doctor Who*, August 1980.

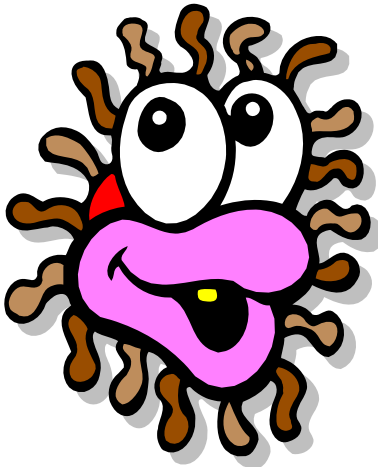
¹⁹ Marc Platt, *Cat's Cradle: Time's Crucible* (London: Doctor Who Books, 1992).

²⁰ Arthur C. Clarke, *Childhood's End* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1953).

a view towards using it as the building block of some future system' but rather, a negative critical principle.²¹

Fertility in alien species is not exclusively depicted as lacking and indeed, the commonest scenarios are those of alien hyperfecundity or desire for *lebensraum*, with threatened or actual invasion of Earth and/or of its human colonies.²² For example, frightening alien hyperfecundity is seen on Medea in Niven's *Flare Time* (1985),²³ and alien invasion is threatened famously by Martians,²⁴ Niven's Kzin,²⁵ Niven and Pournelle's Moties,²⁶ the incredible and physically unbeatable aliens in Simak's *Our Children's Children* (1974)²⁷ and innumerable others.

A freemartin is an infertile female mammal which has been masculinised and has non-functioning ovaries through the intrauterine exposure of male hormones from an accompanying male twin. This is the normal outcome of mixed-sex twins in all cattle species, and also occasionally occurs in other twin mammal pregnancies.²⁸ Alien freemartins are alluded to in Niven's *Footfall* (1985), females that have all of the requisite characteristics of females of the species but never come into heat during the breeding season.²⁹



The alien state may curtail population levels by deliberately removing knowledge of sex, and in *Star Trek* episode *The Apple* (1967), humanoid but alien denizens serve their State but have no knowledge of sex, and in return, never age or die,³⁰

Aliens have also had to submit to the immortality/infertility trope and Silverberg's *Downward to the Earth* (1969)³¹ refers frequently to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) with many of the themes experienced by Conrad's anti-hero (such as anti-colonialism and even a character named Kurtz).³² The novel portrays the alien inhabitants of a human ex-colony world who experience physical rebirth, and are alternately reborn as one or the other of the planet's two sentient races. This process somehow leads to few offspring being produced. Similarly, Sheckley's *The Sweeper of Loray* (1959) depicts an alien village where an endemic vegetable lengthens lifespans significantly but reduces the village's birth rate.³³

In Niven's *Motie* universe, the alien Moties must become pregnant regularly or die, and decision-maker Moties have a biological imperative not only to breed but also to protect

²¹ Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future* (London: Verso, 2005), p. 175.

²² *Lebensraum* is German for 'living space', a Nazi concept popularised in Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf* (Munich: Franz Eher, 1925).

²³ Larry Niven, 'Flare Time', in *Medea, Harlan's World*, ed. by Ellison.

²⁴ Wells, *The War of the Worlds*.

²⁵ Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*.

²⁶ Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle, *The Mote In God's Eye* (New York: Pocket Books, 1976).

²⁷ Clifford D. Simak, *Our Children's Children* (New York: Putnam, 1974).

²⁸ F. R. Lillie, 'Theory of the Free Martin', *Science*, 43 (1916), 611.

²⁹ Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle, *Footfall* (New York: Del Rey, 1985).

³⁰ 'The Apple', dir. by Joseph Pevney, *Star Trek The Original Series*, October 1967.

³¹ Robert Silverberg, *Downward to the Earth* (New York: Signet, 1969).

³² Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (London: Blackwood's Magazine, 1899).

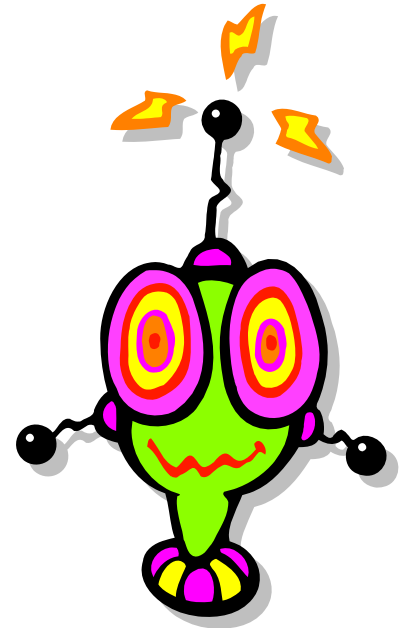
³³ Robert Sheckley, 'The Sweeper of Loray', *Galaxy*, April 1959.

their offspring and siblings. Decision makers who are old or have become sterile may be allowed to hold positions for the good of the race, including the position of 'Keeper', whose function it is to safeguard museums that server as repositories for technology so as to help the survivors rebuild civilisation as quickly as possible during the inevitable and endless cycles of advancement of civilisation and collapse.³⁴

The Draconian species in Brunner's *Total Eclipse* (1974) experience radical changes in physical morphology, from an infant neuter stage, to an active male stage, to a short and fertile female stage and finally, to a sessile and sterile old age.³⁵ This type of change is known as peramorphosis, a cataclysmic change in which a species takes on form beyond adulthood.

In a cunning twist on a dangerous fertile female alien, in the film *Species III* (2004), a scientist creates a sterile male alien partner,³⁶ a well-known technique that has actually been utilised to curb insect populations as females who expend energy mating with sterile males do not produce offspring.³⁷

Interestingly, in the *Star Trek Voyager* episode *Prototype* (1996),³⁸ a group of sentient warrior robots are discovered. These had turned on their organic builders and destroyed them when they had attempted to shut the robots down as they were no longer needed for war. However, the builders had created a failsafe mechanism in order to prevent the robots from creating more such creatures. *Voyager's* chief engineer is abducted, coerced to circumvent this limitation and successfully creates a new robot, but on animating it, realises the error of this course of action, and like Frankenstein, destroys her creation.³⁹



Discussion

Several tropes emerge from this reading of infertility in aliens within the SF genre. Clearly, 'the pull toward strangeness invites the SF writer to investigate aspects of society, self, perception, and the physical universe that are difficult or impossible to represent through conventional realism'.⁴⁰ However, these stories still accede to the 'cognitive utility of SF [...] based on the rigor of applying scientific laws; such worlds must be possible', with the need for plausibility,⁴¹ originally inculcated through John W. Campbell's paradigmatic editorship of *Astounding Science Fiction*, a golden age of SF, an era which 'valorises a particular sort of writing: 'Hard SF'', linear narratives, heroes solving problems or countering threats in a space-opera or technological-adventure idiom.⁴²

Individual issues that arise from this reading include caution as to what we might encounter 'out there', an admonishment to exert vigilance and prudence in our exploration

³⁴ Niven, *The Mote In God's Eye*.

³⁵ John Brunner, *Total Eclipse* (New York: Doubleday, 1974).

³⁶ *Species III*, dir. by Brad Turner (MGM, 2004).

³⁷ International Atomic Energy Agency, *The Sterile-Insect Technique and Its Field Applications* (Vienna: International Atomic Energy Agency, 1974).

³⁸ 'Prototype', dir. by Jonathon Frakes, *Star Trek Voyager*, January 1996.

³⁹ Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, *Frankenstein* (London: John Murray, 1818).

⁴⁰ Brian Attebery, *Decoding Gender in Science Fiction* (London, Routledge, 2002), p. 5.

⁴¹ Roger Luckhurst, 'The Many Deaths of Science Fiction: A Polemic', *Science Fiction Studies*, 21 (1994), 35-50, p. 39.

⁴² Adam Roberts, *The History of Science Fiction* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 195.

of the unknown while quenching our drive to learn, fuelled, sometimes excessively by what Niven repeatedly refers to as our 'monkey curiosity'. Contrariwise, we should also be cautious as to how we pass on our hard-earned technology to individuals who may not be prepared to handle such boons, with terrible consequences. Furthermore, warfare may also be precipitated by infertility if this affects sufficient numbers of a particular population. In addition, hubristic overreaching of any type risks tragedy, such as unseemly striving for immortality.

This *tour de force* which comprises the intersection of infertility in aliens within SF is clearly representative of SF's escapist and overall optimistic outlook which is repeatedly reiterated, and comparable to a 'gnostic urge to be elsewhere: out of this time, out of this body, out of this chain of circumstance that we call life'.⁴³ Despite canonical fiction labelling SF as junk fiction, SF is hugely enjoyed by its readers and when read for fun, this means that 'we have read them, we are reading them, and we will continue to read them'.⁴⁴

Yet another trope is that as can be seen from the wide timespan of these stories, 'as history keeps reformulating the issues, writers keep reframing, filtering, and inverting the Utopian systems that embody them'.⁴⁵ The genre's readers are also permanently aware of the changing patterns and rules, and consciously or subconsciously see that, however slightly, each new story subtly or radically changes its own genre. In a very real sense, junk fiction readers (and this includes SF) are not simply reading narratives, they are reading entire genres and listening to the stories creating dialogs between each other inside these genres.

⁴³ Luckhurst, 'The Many Deaths', p. 24.

⁴⁴ Thomas J. Roberts, *An Aesthetics of Junk Fiction* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1990), p. 95.

⁴⁵ Atterberry, *Decoding Gender in Science Fiction*, p. 128.

Online only bonus: References for Alien Infertility in Science Fiction

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