

The Future Is Now: Science Fiction As Allegory

Here are some of my favorite teachable texts that address the variety of **cultural conflicts** we encounter in the American Studies classroom. Unless otherwise indicated as “Advanced,” they are accessible for a variety of reading levels. Of course, this list isn’t meant to be exhaustive (in fact, it’s very subjective) -- so please send suggestions my way (bheidkamp@oprfs.org) and check back to the website -- <http://www.criticsandbuilders.com/sf> -- for updates

Also realize that when we view texts as “allegories” that does not indicate a one-to-one correspondence between the characters/objects in the text and the “real world” (for example, seeing the robots in “Bicentennial Man” as direct symbols of African Americans in the United States). Rather, we should view these texts as “cracked mirror” as complex allegories of human tendencies and social constructions, which manifest themselves in a variety of ways in a variety of situations (for example, seeing the interaction between humans and the robots in “Bicentennial Man” as reflecting our inherent fear of difference, the deep psychological need for humans to define themselves against an Other, society’s inevitable manipulation of the rights of citizenship to construct its exclusive identity, etc).

Race/Otherness

Novels

Dawn (Octavia Butler)
Ender’s Game trilogy (Orson Scott Card)
Serpent’s Reach (C.J. Cherryh)
Ring of Swords (Eleanor Arnason)

Short Stories

“Bicentennial Man” (Isaac Asimov)

Film

Close Encounters of the Third Kind
E.T.

Gender/Patriarchy

Novel (n)

Handmaid’s Tale (Margaret Atwood)
The Female Man (Joanna Russ)

Short Stories (ss)

“When It Changed” (Joanna Russ)
“The Women Men Don’t See” (James Tiptree Jr.)

Film (f)

Alien/Aliens

Advanced

The Left Hand of Darkness (Le Guin – n)

Class/Social Hierarchy

Novel

Player Piano (Kurt Vonnegut)
The Dispossessed (LeGuin)

Short Stories

“Harrison Bergeron” (Kurt Vonnegut)

Film
Metropolis (new restored version)

Imperialism/Rugged Individualism/Frontier

Novel
Ender's Game trilogy (Orson Scott Card)
Nova (Samuel Delany)
Dune (Frank Herbert)
Seventh Son (Orson Scott Card – actually a fantasy but too good not to mention)

Film
Star Trek: The Next Generation
Firefly (TV)
Serenity
Mad Max/Road Warrior

Identity/What It Means to Be Human

Novel
The Martian Chronicles (Ray Bradbury)
Dawn (Octavia Butler)

Short Stories
“The Planners” (Kate Wilhelm)

Film
Blade Runner (inspired by Philip Dick novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*)
A.I.
Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind
Contact

Advanced
“Johnny Mnemonic” (William Gibson – ss)

Order vs. Freedom

Novel
The Dispossessed (Le Guin)

Film
Minority Report (inspired by Philip Dick short story of same name)
Brazil
Robocop

Advanced
Neuromancer (William Gibson – n)

Love and Fear of Technology

Novel
Looking Backward (Edward Bellamy)

Film
Terminator and T2
Battlestar Galactica (recent version -TV)
Metropolis

Advanced
Snow Crash (Neal Stephenson – n)

War/Arms Race/Nuclear Proliferation

Novel
Time Out of Joint (Philip K. Dick)
Cat's Cradle (Kurt Vonnegut)

Short Stories
"Report on the Barnhouse Effect" (Kurt Vonnegut)
"Coming Attraction" (Fritz Leiber)

Film
Dr. Strangelove
Mad Max/The Road Warrior

Community vs. Individuals

Novel
Fahrenheit 451 (Ray Bradbury)

Short Stories
"Desertion" (Clifford Simak)

Film
Gattaca
Strange Days
Star Wars: Empire Strikes Back

Power, Agency and Social Change

Novel
The Parable of the Sower/The Parable of the Talents (Octavia Butler)
The Lathe of Heaven (Ursula Le Guin)

Film
Minority Report
Contact