

Intelligent Life on Mars: Depictions of Intelligence in Science Fiction

To most ancient peoples, Mars was a god, harbinger of war and destruction. While our knowledge of the nature of Mars changed greatly over the ensuing centuries, the attraction Mars holds for the human imagination never waned and continues to our day. Since the discovery that Mars was in fact a planet similar to Earth, the idea that it might harbor intelligent life has enthralled many people. Thus it is only natural that science fiction authors, those members of the human race who put into print the imagination of the species, should turn much of their efforts to speculation about the form and nature of such life. What is striking about this body of literature depicting Mars is its homogeneity. While the methods of presentation may vary from work to work, two themes truly dominate the genre: first, the decay and decline of Mars as a planet and Martian civilization in particular and second, the impact which humanity has on Mars and the ways in which Mars, in turn, impacts those earthlings who live on it, especially evident in the transformation of earthlings into Martians.

Before discussing these themes, attention must be given to the discovery made by Mariner 4 in July 1965 and confirmed beyond any doubt by Mariner 9 in November 1971 that Mars is incapable of supporting intelligent life. Understandably, this discovery had a profound impact on writers of science fiction concerning Mars, especially concerning intelligent life. While scientists had suspected for quite a while that Mars, in particular

the Martian atmosphere, could not sustain intelligent life, it wasn't until the Mariner missions sent back images of the surface and analyses of the atmosphere that all doubt was laid to rest. Thus authors writing prior to the Mariner missions, such as Roger Zelazny ("A Rose for Ecclesiastes"), could continue to write stories involving native Martians and expeditions from Earth that could breathe the Martian atmosphere unaided. The premise that Mars was so much like Earth that no extraordinary measures were required for earthlings to live there was accepted without question by authors such as Edgar Rice Burroughs (the "Barsoom" novels), C.S. Lewis (*Out of the Silent Planet*), and Ray Bradbury (*The Martian Chronicles*). That H.G. Wells' Martians in *War of the Worlds* are similarly able to survive on Earth confirms his acceptance of the similarity of the two worlds.

With the information sent back from the Mariner missions, science fiction authors had to adapt their writing to the accepted facts of Martian reality. They adopted a number of ways of either incorporating or getting around these discoveries. The simplest of these methods was simply ignoring the conditions of Mars and continuing as before. An author who does this runs the risk of becoming obsolete, and perhaps these stories should be categorized as fantasy rather than science fiction. Fortunately, most of these stories were either written by authors such as Ray Bradbury, whose story "The Love Affair", written in 1982, was basically nothing more than another chapter of *The Martian Chronicles*, who had established styles and were not expected to abandon them or as tributes to these authors, as in the case of Michael Moorcock's "Lost Sorceress of the Silent Citadel", Mike Resnick and M. Shayne Bell's "Flower Children of Mars", and Paul Di Filippo's "A Martian Theodicy". A notable exception is *The Second Invasion from*

Mars by Soviet brothers Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, published in English in 1979. In this story, the reader is never quite certain whether those who take over power in the area in which the story is set are Martians or just really strange humans. The protagonist of the story, Mr. Apollo, is at first convinced that the invaders cannot be Martians:

When will we ever learn to stop believing in rumors? For it is well known that Mars has an extremely thin atmosphere, its climate is excessively severe and almost lacks water, the basis of all life. The myths about the canals were thrown overboard a long time ago, since the canals turned out to be nothing more than an optical illusion. In brief, all this recalls the panic of the year before last, when one-legged Polyphemus ran around town with a fowling piece shouting that a gigantic man-eating triton has escaped from the zoo. (Strugatsky, 165)

Yet as the tale continues and Apollo is exposed to the invaders' strange technology and obsession with stomach juice, he comes to the opinion that they are indeed Martians, despite the fact that the closest he comes to actually interacting with a Martian is a (perhaps imagined) encounter after which he and the friend he was with can neither clearly remember what happened nor agree on the details which they do remember (Strugatsky, 216-218). By using this subtle approach, the Strugatsky brothers are able to involve "Martians" as characters in their work without these Martians actually being present.

Most authors, however, have found ways to incorporate the nature of Mars into their writings rather than simply ignoring it. The most common practice among authors of "serious" science fiction is to focus on the transformation of humans into Martians, to be discussed in greater detail below. Thus Martians in these stories are imported Martians. Some, in a manner reminiscent of people convinced that the so-called "Face on Mars" seen in a photo of the surface is evidence of past intelligent life on Mars, write of ruins and artifacts found on Mars from a dead civilization that was either indigenous to

Mars or transplanted there from elsewhere. “The Real Story” by Alastair Reynolds and “No Jokes on Mars” by James Blish fall into this category. Others like Patrick O’Leary’s “The Me After the Rock,” in which an entity inhabiting a rock on Mars possesses one of the astronauts exploring the planet, depict intelligent life that is so different from humanity as to be almost unrecognizable as intelligence. Perhaps the most inventive is the approach taken by Eric Brown in his short story “Myths of the Martian Future.” This story is set so far in the future that the sun has expanded into a red giant, destroying Earth and warming Mars to the point that intelligent macrobiological life forms can appear after millions of years of evolution.

For those authors who do include the presence of non-human intelligent life or the remnants of their civilization in their works, these civilizations are almost invariably either dead or in a state of decay or decline. While such a tendency might be expected from writers working following the Mariner probes in light of the revealed incapability of Mars at the present time to sustain any such civilization, this tendency is every bit as strong in pre-Mariner pieces. The Martians of *The War of the Worlds*, while greatly beyond mankind technologically, seem to be almost physiologically degenerate, being “heads, merely heads” (Wells, 245). Burroughs’ Barsoom is filled with the ruins of an extinct civilization (Burroughs, ch. 11) and the red Martians fight to maintain a dwindling supply of water and especially air. C.S. Lewis’ Mars in *Out of the Silent Planet*, while not in a state of decay, is older than the Earth and has run the course of its development. Bradbury’s *The Martian Chronicles* is a good example of a tale of decaying Martian civilization. While the impact of the human invasion in the form of chicken pox is what finally destroys the indigenous population, there is no question that the Martians were

already in decline. Hathaway of the Fourth Expedition to Mars in his report to Captain Wilder, upon being asked if he found anything alive, states, “Nothing whatever. So I went out to check the other towns. Four out of five have been empty for thousands of years. What happened to the original inhabitants I haven’t the faintest idea.” (Bradbury, 50) Roger Zelazny’s “A Rose for Ecclesiastes” is the last of the pre-Mariner Mars science fiction, and is concerned entirely with the struggle of a young linguist and poet from Earth to rescue the people of Mars, who are slowly going extinct from sterility. And as was mentioned above, much of post Mariner sci-fi includes artifacts of long gone civilizations.

“A Rose for Ecclesiastes” is also exemplary as a tale of cross-cultural exchange and integration of a human into Martian culture. Gallinger, the main character, is a poet and linguist from Earth who is invited to study the sacred texts of the indigenous Martian population. In the process of learning their language and translating their texts, Gallinger reads of a “plague that does not kill” (Zelazny, 321), a plague of sterility and impotence that is slowly killing the race, a fate which they have accepted and refuse to attempt to change. Gallinger also discovers parallels between the Martian religion and the biblical Book of Ecclesiastes, and as an exercise attempts to translate it into the Martian sacred tongue. When he impregnates one of the Martian women and realizes that their civilization can be saved if only they would be willing to do so, Gallinger preaches to them from Ecclesiastes in order to convince them that despite the seeming hopelessness of existence, that is no excuse to cease struggling to reach for greater things. In doing so, Gallinger fulfills a Martian prophecy and prevails upon the leaders of the community to attempt to save their species. The significance of this course of events lies not only in the

impact Gallinger's actions had upon Martian civilization, but also in the ways contact with Martian civilization changed him. Had his way of thinking not been altered by this contact, it is unlikely that Gallinger would have either recognized the parallels between Ecclesiastes and Martian thought or been able to utilize this knowledge. Saving Mars required being able to think like a Martian.

This idea of Mars shaping mankind even as mankind attempts to shape Mars is a common one in science fiction about Mars. In the aftermath of the Mariner missions, this theme has become the most prominent among writers of science fiction. The rationale behind this is explained in an internal monologue by a character in Kim Stanley

Robinson's *The Martians*:

She wanted life out there as badly as John or Ivan or any of the rest of them... If only life had once existed here – snails, lichen, bacteria, anything – it would somehow take away some of this landscape's awful barrenness.

And if Mars itself could not provide, it became necessary to supply it – to do whatever was necessary to make life possible on its desolate surface, to transform it as soon as possible, to *give it life*. Now she understood the connection between the two main topics of evening conversation in their isolated camps: terraforming, and the discovery of extinct Martian life-forms; and the conversations took place all over the planet, less intently than out here in the canyons, perhaps, but still, all her life, Eileen had been hoping for this discovery, had *believed* in it.

...They would never find remnants of Martian life; no one ever would. She knew that was true in every cell of her. All the so-called discoveries, all the Martians in her books – they were all part of a simple case of projection, nothing more. Humans wanted Martians, that was all there was to it... All so many dreams. Mars was a dead planet... Not even dead, which implied a life and a dying. Just... nothing. A red void. (Robinson, *The Martians*, 45-46)

Yet in the depths of her depression, Eileen finds hope in watching the manner in which

Roger Clayborne, born and raised on Mars, walks the planet's surface:

Now there, she thought, is a man reconciled to the absolute deadness of Mars. It seemed his home, his landscape. An old line occurred to her: "We have met the enemy, and he is us." And then something from Bradbury: "The Martians were there... Timothy and Robert and Michael and Mom and Dad."

She pondered the idea as she followed Clayborne down their canyon, trying to imitate that stride. (Robinson, *The Martians*, 46)

Many science fiction writers seem to have undergone a similar conversion, pondering the promise of the transformation of men into Martians.

Despite its prominence in Martian sci-fi today, the transformation of men into Martians as they in turn alter Mars around them is not a new idea. In many pre-Mariner tales, as the American West was tamed, Mars took its place in the collective imagination as a wild frontier that could be conquered by those with the courage to do so. Similarly, just as those who settled the American West became Americans themselves, regardless of their nation of origin, so too do those who traveled to Mars in these works often transfer their identity and allegiance to their adopted planet. As science fiction itself evolved to adapt to new knowledge of Mars, the idea of a conversion to Mars evolved as well.

Feelings about Mars in science fiction generally fall into a spectrum ranging from those who only value Mars for its value to them personally and wish to remake Mars in their own image (Mars For Us) to those who value Mars and whatever civilization is found on it for its own intrinsic worth, apart from any personal benefit it may provide (Mars First). Edgar Rice Burroughs hero John Carter is a classic example of a character that values Mars for its ability to fulfill his desires. There is little doubt that Carter prefers Mars to Earth, but his desire to return to Mars has nothing to do with a love for the planet or its people in general, but rather his love for the Martian princess Dejah Thoris: “For ten years I have waited and prayed for an answer to my questions. For ten years I have waited and prayed to be taken back to the world of my lost love. I would rather lie dead beside her there than live on Earth all those millions of terrible miles from her.” (Burroughs, ch 28) In fact, Carter’s feelings about Mars and its culture are at best

ambivalent and at worst dismissive. He seems to adopt the Martian way of living, but only where it doesn't conflict with his values as a Southerner and a gentleman. One gets the sense that he doesn't particularly care what the Martian culture is, but simply adopts most of it because that is the easiest way to get along, and only respects it insofar as the red Martian culture is responsible for the nature of his love. As far as Mars itself goes, the planet enters his thinking no further than as the home of his love and for its light gravity that allows him to perform astounding feats of manliness. John Carter takes what he is able to and changes the face of Mars to suit his perception of how things should be as much as possible. He doesn't really have any sense of reverence for what Mars is and how it has developed, and in many cases looks down on those he encounters.

The Martian Chronicles contains the whole spectrum of attitudes toward Mars. Bradbury captures the struggle between the two mindsets in "And the Moon Be Still As Bright", which tells the story of the first "successful" mission sent to Mars. A crewman named Biggs embodies all that is negative with the Mars For Us mindset; he is crass, destructive, and shows absolutely no respect for either Mars or the dead Martian civilization. One of his fellow crewmen later sets up a hot dog stand at a Martian crossroads, ignorant of everything save the profitability of its location (Bradbury, 133). On the other side is Jeff Spender, an archaeologist who falls in love with Mars and its dead civilization. He fears that men like Biggs will come and destroy everything good and beautiful on Mars:

Ask me, then, if I believe in the spirit of the things as they were used, and I'll say yes. They're all here. All the things which had uses. All the mountains which had names. And we'll never be able to use them without feeling uncomfortable. And somehow the mountains will never sound right to us; we'll give them new names, but the old names are there, somewhere in time, and the mountains were shaped and seen under those names. The names we'll give to

the canals and mountains and cities will fall like so much water on the back of a mallard. No matter how we touch Mars, we'll never touch it. And then we'll get mad at it, and you know what we'll do? We'll rip it up, rip the skin off, and change it to fit ourselves. (Bradbury, 54)

Spender's disdain for his crewmates and protectiveness of Mars and its dead culture eventually lead him to claim to be a Martian and start killing off his crewmates until he is shot by the captain. In the end, Spender becomes as ugly as those he hates.

A similar dichotomy is even more starkly presented in Kim Stanley Robinson's *Red Mars*. This novel shows the author's stunning insight into the human condition. Sax Russell and Ann Clayborne represent the two opposing points of view on the worth of Mars, just as Biggs and Spender do in *The Martian Chronicles*. Yet where Biggs and Spender stand for the excesses and abuse each attitude taken to extreme will result in, Sax and Ann present a mostly rational, constructive version of the argument, which revolves around terraforming Mars. When the dispute comes to a head, each gives an eloquent defense of their point of view. Ann declares:

Here you sit in your little holes running your little experiments, making things like little kids with a chemistry set in a basement, while the whole time an entire world sits outside your door. A world where the landforms are a hundred times larger than their equivalents on Earth and a thousand times older, with evidence concerning the beginning of the solar system scattered all over, as well as the whole history of a planet, scarcely changed in the last billion years. And you're going to wreck it all. And without ever honestly admitting what you're doing, either. Because we could live here and study the planet without changing it... You want to do *that* because you think you can. You want to try it out and see – as if this were some big playground sandbox for you to build castles in. A big Mars jar! You find your justifications where you can, but it's bad faith, and it's *not science*... It's not science, I say! It's just playing around. And for that game you're going to wreck the historical record, destroy the polar caps, and the outflow channels, and the canyon bottoms – destroy a beautiful pure landscape, and for *nothing at all*. (Robinson, *Red Mars*, 177)

In Ann's speech the same passion can be seen for "all the things that had uses" as Spender exhibits, but Ann never allows herself to be twisted into harming others by these

feelings. Sax doesn't contradict Ann's points; rather, he puts forward a system of values in which the possibility of what could be takes priority over preserving what has been:

The beauty of Mars exists in the human mind... Without the human presence it is just a collection of atoms, no different than any other random speck of matter in the universe. It's we who understand it, and we who give it meaning... Now that we are here, it isn't enough to just hide under ten meters of soil and study the rock. That's science, yes, and needed science too. But science is more than that. Science is part of a larger human enterprise, and that enterprise includes going to the stars, adapting to other planets, adapting them to us. Science is creation. (Robinson, *Red Mars*, 177-178)

In the end, then, this debate is not simply about terraforming Mars. It is really part of a larger debate that is central to human existence: old vs. new, tradition vs. innovation, retaining the past and the good things known to be found in it or facing the risks that the future may hold in spite of all of its bright promise. It is a question that each individual must decide for him or herself and Robinson does a masterful job of presenting the uncertainties each human being must face in making such a decision.

Most people, however, fall somewhere in between the extreme stands taken by Biggs and Spender, Ann and Sax, and it is in the synthesis of the two views that authors of science fiction find meaning. By bringing the best of what they had on Earth with them and adapting it to Mars while facing the future, with its risks and potential, these characters manage to respect Mars without treating it like either a tool or a distant god, resulting in a civilization that is Martian. As mentioned in a quote above, the final chapter of *The Martian Chronicles* tells of a family come to Mars to escape a nuclear Armageddon that has destroyed Earth. Symbolic of leaving their lives on Earth behind, the father of the family burns a number of documents brought from the Earth, finishing with a map of the planet, just as the Earth itself burned in the fires of a nuclear war. Yet they still retain values and a manner of living learned on Earth while turning their backs

on Earth and becoming totally Martian. To drive this point home, the father promises to show his sons Martians, and does so by showing them their family's reflection in the canal.

Much of *Red Mars* is also concerned with the creation of a culture and civilization that is truly Martian and not merely transplanted from Earth. An example of attempts to synthesize Mars with Earth culture is the chant of the Sufi Muslims utilizing the name of Mars in many different languages as they dance. John Boone is murdered, in part, for his attempts to keep Earth prejudices and biases from poisoning Mars. In a speech to a gathering on Olympus Mons, Boone states the case for synthesis:

[T]he imperative [is] to invent a new social order that is purely Martian... Now I know I used to say that we had to invent it all from scratch but in these last few years traveling around and meeting you all I've seen that I was wrong to say that, it's not like we have nothing and are being forced to conjure forms godlike out of the vacuum... we have the DNA pieces of culture all made and broken and mixed by history, and we can choose and cut and clip together from what's best in that gene pool... a bit from here and there, whatever's appropriate... (Robinson, *Red Mars*, 379)

Boone's hopes for a better future are based upon the belief that it is possible for human beings to learn from their mistakes. In the end, Boone gives his life in the cause of progress, fully aware of the danger to his life, but willing to make the ultimate sacrifice in the hopes that his efforts and the efforts of those like him would lead to a better future for all of humanity.

At its heart, almost all of science fiction, especially that related to Mars, is a statement, much like John Boone's, of hope for or despair over the future of the human species. The setting of science fiction in the future provides a unique perspective for judgment on the direction society, technology, and civilization are headed. Mars provides a particularly potent setting for these stories because "Mars is more like the

Earth than any other world we know... and that is possibly why science fiction authors still like to write about it, just as science fiction readers still like to read about it.”

(Moore, 11) Mars, especially in science fiction, is a mirror that reflects the hopes and fears of humanity. That being the case, the question humankind must ask itself as it views its reflection in the science fiction of Mars is this: Will humanity continue to grow and progress, keeping the good it has discovered while grasping the opportunities the future presents to improve itself, or will we, as have so many fictional Martian civilizations, slowly decay until only the remnants of what was once a thriving civilization remain to testify of the grand potential that was once ours?

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