

Helpful Hints for Exploring Science Fiction Texts

As you read, annotate your text (either on the text itself or on a separate sheet of paper). Which parts do you like? Which parts confuse you? What questions do you have? What ideas do they spark?

Mark important passages/excerpts/quotes and bring them in for discussion in class and in your blogs (make sure you have the relevant page / paragraph number handy).

Make connections among different texts. As the semester progresses, you should consider how each work treats similar themes in different ways. Pay attention to the key terms/themes/questions below (in the “Framework”) that recur in the texts we explore.

You will often encounter vocabulary that you do not know. If you are unable to define a word exactly, look it up and write down the definition/its part of speech (and perhaps even a sentence or mnemonic device to help you remember it). Keep a list going as you may be quizzed at any time throughout the semester (without prior notice) on any word from any of our texts, blogs (OpenLab site), or in-class discussions. It is impossible to fully explore all the subtleties of a text without understanding what each word in it means.

Framework for Analyzing Science Fiction Texts

Remember that there are often multiple responses to the questions below and that there is also overlap among the questions. You should explore these varying interpretations and meanings as well as the convergences and possibly even contradictions in the texts.

1. What **values** are emphasized in the text’s society (or societies)?
2. How is **happiness** defined in the society?
3. What is the status of **progress** (science/technology) within the society?
4. Is **ignorance** or **knowledge** valued more? Is knowledge seen as dangerous or subversive?
5. How is **stability** defined? What is sacrificed in order to achieve it?
6. How is **freedom** treated?
7. What is the status of **privacy**?
8. Is **individuality** (unique/unrestrained expression) allowed, or is it controlled/surveilled/prohibited?
9. How are **gender** roles—male/female—treated (if at all) in the work?
10. How is **family** portrayed in the text?

11. How much emphasis is placed on **community** or **solidarity**? Are true **intimacy** and **communication** allowed or encouraged (or do we only see superficial bonds form among characters)?
12. What is the status of **religion**? Does it exist and, if so, in what form? Who/what is “worshipped”?
13. What is **the class/caste system** in the society? Is the society organized hierarchically?
14. How do **propaganda**, **rhetoric**, and **slogans** function in this society?
15. What is the status of **literacy** (the written word, books, etc.)?
16. What roles do **history** and **the past** play in the text?
17. Are **nostalgia** and **sentimentality** present in the text? If so, how do they function?
18. Are there forms of **soma**¹ that are available/encouraged and that help members of the society to escape/distract from their reality? [Remember, “soma” can come in many forms besides pills: television, virtual worlds, sex, entertainment, etc.]
19. Is there a contrast between **civilized (cultured or acculturated)** and **uncivilized (uncultured or not acculturated)** peoples and places?
20. Have the people in this society somehow moved beyond the **human** (or what we traditionally consider to be “human”)? If so, in what way? What are the consequences?
21. Which characters (if any) **rebel** against the society? Why? What are the consequences of this rebellion? What do these consequences tell us about the message/argument of the text?
22. Are there characters who are **other** (they don’t belong/fit in)? In what way are they “other” (physically—such as aliens or robots—or just “different” in some way)? What does this marginality reveal about the dominant society? What does it reveal about our own society?
23. Is there a **catalyzing event(s)** that brings about rebellion or conflict in the society? If so, what is it?
24. Is there a **fatal flaw(s)** of the society (something that will be its downfall, or eventually destroy it)? If so, what is it?
25. Can the society go on forever? Or is there **hope? Possibility of change**? Where can this hope be found?
26. What aspects of the society resonate with aspects of our own (contemporary) society? What aspects contradict our society?

¹ In Aldous Huxley’s famous dystopian novel *Brave New World* (1932), “soma” is a drug that everyone takes to ensure they are constantly happy, free from worries or problems.