

In this critique of the short story “Starry Night,” I will focus on two topics. First, how the story uses parallels and contrasts to tie the plotline together. Second, issues associated with the exploration of racism, art, and human condition presented in the story. I will avoid discussing the scientific accuracy/plausibility and plot development/presentation of the story.

The story consistently uses both parallel structures and parallel plot. In terms of structure and format, the story is presented in the form of two journals/logs, one written by a human and the other written by an alien. This format narrows down the scope of the story, displaying the experiences of two civilizations from the viewpoints of two individuals. The reader is given snapshots of key events, a timeline that highlights the most important elements. This approach gets the main ideas across succinctly, but perhaps at the expense of a more continuous, smooth plot.

The parallels and contrasts in plot are more important than parallel in structure and helps convey the message that there is something universal about the experiences of intellectual species. This story presents two models of civilization: a “technology utopia” where scientific development and social stability come at the expense of creative, individual expression, and an “art utopia” where intellectual vitality and liberation prevails, along with possibility for conflict. We see both models in both the human world and the alien world. At the beginning of the story, Earth is portrayed as a technology utopia, where the protagonist laments the loss of literature and longs for what she sees as the art utopia of the twentieth century. The alien world is also initially presented as a technology utopia, where advanced technologies are accompanied by minimal social conflict and lack of appreciation towards art. We then see the transformation of both

societies toward an art utopia. The alien world is influenced by the human aspiration toward an artistic understanding of the universe and start to appreciate that art and science are both valid intellectual endeavors. In the end, the conflicts that came along with the individualism consumes their world, but they seem to value the liberation of thought more than societal stability. At the very end of the story, we see humans being agitated by the alien experience and conflicts arising between the different schools of thought, not unlike what happened to the aliens. Humans' attitude toward this shift, however, could be more complicated. This is shown by the contrast of the protagonist's character at the beginning and end of the story. At the beginning, her voice in the diary is lively, slightly sarcastic, and optimistic. She sees conflicts as romance and loves her literature. In the end, however, she takes on a very grim voice. As potentials for conflict rise, she detaches herself from literature and instead seeks shelter in the safe, techno-optimist world. The person who wanted the art utopia the most cringes when it is finally about to come.

The contrast between these two models of society is an example of many of the debatable ideas presented in the story. First, note that these two models are not mutually exclusive. While a purely technology-driven world may fail to inspire art, the story portrays social conflicts as the main driving force behind any development. Social struggles, although costing huge resources, allowed humans to develop significantly faster than the aliens. The aliens state that artistic expressions led to their technology boom. They use the Renaissance to refer to their blooming art, while in human history, the Renaissance also enabled the Enlightenment and rapid scientific development.

Another very interesting issue is the alien exploration of racism. This exploration focuses heavily on the objective environment of the Earth and is ignorant of human and societal factors that could be at play. In essence, this exploration simplifies the complex issue of racism to

outcomes of controllable quantitative experiment. The experiment offers the explanation that racism is an inevitable result of human life on Earth, a byproduct of evolution. This conclusion seems to suggest that there is nothing to be done within the civilized human society that can eradicate racism. Of course, this conclusion is very limiting, as the experiment is performed rather lousily (examining only three factors) and completely ignores active human endeavors to achieve equality. This could potentially be justified by saying “aliens don’t understand human society and the experimenter is a lousy scientist anyway,” but nonetheless the conclusion drawn here is probably an oversimplification. The beginning of the story also proposes a possible way to achieve greater equality through human endeavors, namely technology developments that eliminate issues with basic human needs such as hunger and poverty.

To conclude, the short story “Starry Night” uses parallel structure and plot to explore many interesting ideas regarding racism, social conflict, art, and science. However, it is also important to recognize that the story is very narrow in scope and the conclusions presented are likely to be oversimplifications.

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